

THE LIBYAN SHORT STORY

PRESENTED BY

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## ABSTRACT

The short story is the dominant literary genre in Libya. This thesis sets out to examine this field of literature as it developed over the last thirty years. The thesis is divided into three parts. The first part consists of three introductory chapters. Chapter One deals with the cultural background during the Ottoman and Italian occupation; in Chapter Two the short story is briefly defined for the purposes of this study while Chapter Three offers a brief survey of the early developments in Libyan story-writing. Part Two is devoted to an analysis of the styles of the main writers and is divided into four chapters each dealing with one of the four main approaches which have been characterised as the Emotional Approach (Chapter Four), the Tell-a-Tale Approach (Chapter Five), the Realistic Approach (Chapter Six) and the Analytical Approach (Chapter Seven). In Part Three some of the main social themes of the Libyan short story are examined in five chapters (Chapters Eight to Twelve). An attempt has been made to identify the characteristics of the Libyan short story, by way of a conclusion.



## INTRODUCTION

The short story in modern Libyan literature is given more prominence than any other form of literary expression. The phenomenon, which is worth exploring, is that while writers in other Arab countries, or indeed in the world as a whole, tend to give partial attention to the short story, devoting the rest of their efforts to other areas of creative activities, most of the Libyan story writers have dedicated their time entirely to writing short stories rather than novels or plays. We may understand their diffidence in writing works of drama for these depend, for their production, on the collective efforts of many other talents such as acting, direction, design, and above all on a tradition of theatre which has been lacking in Libyan society.

The question of why the short story and not the novel should attain primacy in Libyan literature, still, however remains an area for speculation. Indeed, my intention when embarking on this study was to devote it to modern Libyan prose writings, namely the novel, the play and the short story, but I soon realised that my research would be mainly centred on the short story as there was little of significance in the fields of the novel and drama. I therefore decided to confine this study to the short story, as it has become the only major vehicle for Libyan prose writers.

The reasons for the short story attracting the attention of the Libyan writer, rather than the novel, should be sought in the peculiarities of Libyan society itself. The following ideas may be suggested by way of speculation on the subject:

Firstly, Libya as an underpopulated country, with its origins in a nomadic social structure, does not offer the multitude of characters and patterns of life, nor the diversified panoramic social spectrum with its wide range of thoughts, ideas and concerns, nor does it have the interplay of relations, actions, emotions, which feed the long narrative. Of course the vastness of the country, more than seven times the size of Britain with one twentieth of its population, and the great distances which extend between its peoples, contributes to creating a situation more ideal for the short story than the novel. But, perhaps more importantly, is the tribal social code of bedouin society which is so restrictive as regards relationships between people, and helps to create a situation which leaves the novel with little to draw upon, while providing ample opportunity for short fictional work.

Secondly, Libyan society abiding by traditional conventions up to the present day, separates men and women, both sexes leading separate social lives unable to mix outside the realms of the family. This state of affairs must surely further restrict the range of subject matters for the writer and determine the shape and colour of his creative activity. The writer is left with isolated fragments of human suffering which result from this suppression of basic natural

human inclinations, and he finds it most convenient to express these in the short story.

Thirdly, there must arise from the conflict between traditional and modern conceptions of society an alienation which must affect the psychology of the writer and leave its mark on his subconscious mind. When he is asked to abide by traditional social conventions, the writer will find it harder to suppress his own personality and will use his writing as a vehicle for expressing his sense of outrage and frustration. These expressions belong more appropriately to poetry and the short story than to the novel, which demands a prolonged labour and loses the immediacy of his passion. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the Libyan short story writer gives priority to the cause of the oppressed woman, relating through this, his own crisis, and identifying himself with her cause.

Fourthly, the recent social developments in Libya have produced a crisis in society for no sooner had the country emerged from its battle to assert its identity than it was again plunged into strife, this time as a result of the painful transition from a nomadic, rural and partly-agricultural society to a modern industrial urban society. Helped by the discovery of oil, the rapid change has affected every aspect of social life and has made a profound impression on personal attitudes and patterns of life. This has left the whole of society in a state of turbulence and turmoil. The certainties of a society that has for untold centuries followed a familiar way of life, are shaken, the trodden paths are now



obscured, and an air of uncertainty, a sense of being lost now prevails. The question as to why of all the forms of literature, the short story should be considered the most suitable medium for expressing this moment of crisis has been the subject of many studies. However, our present concern is to observe how a situation like this has also helped to create a climate conducive to the promotion of the short story.

Fifthly, quite apart from social consideration there was a very practical reason for the short story achieving pre-eminence. Until the mid-Sixties no effort was made to establish a book publishing business in Libya and it was therefore difficult for Libyan writers to publish books. Journals and periodicals provided the only outlet for literary expression, and journals are usually reluctant to publish a literary work which is on the lengthy side.

Finally, there is a factor which has been presented on some occasions as the principal reason for the popularity of the short story in Libya, namely the tradition of Libyan folklore which favoured the short fictional work rather than the long narrative. This idea will be discussed in the thesis.

These, therefore, are the main factors that must have determined the nature of Libyan fiction, and has given the short story pre-eminence over all other literary genres, be it the novel, the play or indeed, even poetry, the traditional vehicle for literary expression.

While poetry has received a great deal of attention and has been the subject of many critical studies, the short story has received very little attention, and apart from an M.A. thesis presented at Cairo University in 1974, there has been no study or work of research on the Libyan short story.<sup>1</sup>

What does exist, however, is a large body of reviews of volumes of short stories and other journalistic articles.<sup>2</sup> There are two serious works which study individual writers. The first of these is a biography of <sup>c</sup>Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrātī, which is concerned more with his life than his works, and the second, a study of the works of Khalīfa al-Tikbālī.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the reviews and the above two works, the Libyan short story has, by and large been neglected.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Fawziyya Baryūn, al-Qiṣṣa al-Qaṣīra fī Lībiyā, Cairo University, Fac. of Arts, 1974.
  2. Some of these reviews have been collected and published as books. One collection in particular is worth noting if only for its pretentious title: Sulaymān Kishlāf, Dirāsāt fī al-Qiṣṣa al-Lībiyya al-Qaṣīra (Tripoli 1979).
  3. Najm al-Dīn al-Kīb, <sup>c</sup>Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrātī, al-Bāhith wa-al-Adīb (Tripoli, 1973), and Khalīfa Ḥusayn Muṣṭafā, Dhākirat al-Kalimāt: Dirāsa fī Adab Khalīfa al-Tikbālī (Tripoli 1980).
  4. One work devoted to Libyan literature as a whole does, however, offer many insights into the short story in Libya: Aḥmad Muḥammad <sup>c</sup>Atiyya, Fī al-Adab al-Lībī al-Hadīth (Tripoli 1973). The articles of Professor <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Qādir Quṭṭ, which appear in Egyptian journals, are also of interest for the study of the Libyan short story; of particular interest is his article "Bidāyat al-Qiṣṣa al-Lībiyya al-Qaṣīra", al-Majalla (Cairo), January, 1971.



This thesis, therefore, is intended to fill this gap and to provide a study of the short story in Libya covering the period from the early attempts at story-writing which appeared in the journals of 1908-1911, a time of cultural awakening which was ended by the Italian invasion, until the year 1980 when I began the research for this thesis. It is hoped that this thesis will complement the large body of works devoted to the study of the various literary genres throughout the Arab world.

This study has been divided into three parts. Part One deals with the background to the Libyan short story, and contains three chapters: the first describes the cultural history of Libya during the Ottoman and Italian periods, the second offers a working definition of the short story for the purposes of the study, while the third chapter describes the first attempts at short fiction in Libya.

Part Two contains chapters four to seven, each devoted to one of the four artistic approaches employed by the Libyan story writers, while Part Three is made up of chapters eight to twelve, each devoted to one of the themes of the modern Libyan short story.

As the bulk of short stories appeared only in the last three decades, it was decided not to adopt a chronological approach, in the belief that the object of this research would be better served by studying the artistic approaches that were evident in the Libyan short stories, where critical appreciation is afforded. These approaches have been identified as follows: 1) the emotional approach, 2) the tell-a-tale approach 3) the realistic approach,

and 4) the analytical approach. The study of these approaches form four separate chapters in the second part of the thesis. In this part the works of the most prominent Libyan short story writers during the last three decades are discussed, each one under the most dominant approach evident in his work. Certainly there will be overlaps, but it can be said that the Libyan short story concentrated the development of fiction in three decades in a way that mirrors the development of Arabic fiction in other Arab countries in the last fifty years, so that while romanticism belongs to a period earlier than the Fifties it was the dominant mode with those writers who resumed writing short stories in Libya when the country gained independence in 1951, but was soon to evolve into more sophisticated approaches.

As for the themes, they possess a certain coherence and integrity, but it was necessary to create certain divisions by identifying five separate themes, namely, 1) the urge for personal freedom, 2) the emergence of the urban society, 3) the quest for love, 4) family situations, and 5) the plight of women. However, it can easily be observed that they are all, in fact, functions of the transition from a traditional to a modern society.

The earliest attempts at writing short stories were generally published in journals, and these were made available to me by the Library of the National Museum in Tripoli, the Central Library of Ghār Yūnus University in Benghazi, al-Awqāf Library in Tripoli, and the owners of private collections.



The later short story writers published their stories first in journals and later in the form of collected works. It has been my practice when citing these works to give the latest available editions, as these are the most readily available to the reader.

In the process of writing this thesis I developed a method by which an acknowledgement of the title of every story used is given in Arabic so as to allow the reader to identify the original, while quotations from these stories are given in translation with every attempt made to render these as faithfully as possible to the spirit of the original. It is hoped that the translations may make this study available to students of other literatures.

It remains to be said that while attempting to be objective in my criticism of the writers I realise that I am compromised by knowing most of them and counting many of them among my closest friends. I have however been able to obtain insights into their own personalities which may not have been readily apparent in the stories themselves. Aware of these difficulties I have made every attempt to base my criticism on the text of the story itself and have avoided introducing extraneous factors. I leave it to the literary historians to deal with their lives and other circumstances surrounding these writers. I have also avoided discussing my own stories, or referring to them, for the simple reason that I do not believe I am in the position to criticise my work with the same objectivity with which, I hope, I have viewed the works of others.

In concluding this introduction I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Dr Michael McDonald for the valuable guidance he offered me and the generous spirit with which he offered his advice from the beginning of this work to its completion. I am also indebted to every member of the teaching staff in the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies who have extended their assistance to me through various stages of my research. To them and to many other friends who helped me in the thesis I express my heartfelt thanks.

PART ONE

Chapter One

CULTURAL LIFE DURING THE SECOND OTTOMAN PERIOD (1835-1911)  
AND UNDER THE ITALIAN OCCUPATION (1911-1943)



Although the North African provinces which make up modern Libya were held by the Ottomans from 1551 to 1911, for most of this period Ottoman rule was weak and the Libyan coast and its hinterland were considered to constitute provinces of very little economic or political importance to the government in Istanbul. Indeed from 1711 until 1835 the coast from Tripoli to Benghazi was held by the Qaramānlīs, a local dynasty which ruled in virtual independence from the Ottoman capital. From 1835 onwards the central government attempted to re-integrate the Libyan provinces into the political structure of the Ottoman State. This was not achieved without resistance, but the superior forces of the newly-reformed Ottoman army were finally to subdue all resistance, the most persistent being that of Ghūma al-Mahmūdī in Jabal Nafūsa and that of Sayf al-Nasr in Fazzān. However the reality of Ottoman rule was that while the coastal towns and one or two major trade centres were held by Ottoman troops, by and large, the population was unaffected by their domination except in as much as they were subject to taxation.

The structure of society in Libya was determined by the country's limited natural resources, the hostile desert environment and the geographical conditions, and the politics of fiscal exploitation which left the people of the country suppressed and dispossessed,

barely surviving on the edge of life as desert nomads. A small percentage of the population provided cheap labour to foreigners in the cities. Anthony Thwaite observes that Libya, until the time of independence in 1951 was a society of "peasants and small shopkeepers on the coast and Bedouins elsewhere".<sup>1</sup> Those Bedouins are scattered all over the vast land of Libya, having survived not only the hostile environment but also the wars against alien powers, as Prof. Evans-Pritchard puts it:

"Time and again colonists, tempted from their homes by the short sea routes and the wooded plateau have settled in the country and dispossessed the Bedouins. But in the end it is the Bedouins and not the colonists who survive".<sup>2</sup>

Even when the colonists were able to pacify the country, and practise a strict rule over the natives, these regulations would mostly be confined to the coastal towns; the Bedouins would remain outside, abiding by their own rules and customs, and even when the Turkish <sup>authorities</sup> applied the legal system, its implementation was limited to the coastal and the largely populated centres. In the interior the nomads held to their customs and traditional laws, and sometimes would use force in opposing the attempts of the Turkish administration to apply those rules and regulations, especially if they were in conflict with their traditions. It was under the Wali <sup>c</sup>Alī Ridā Pasha<sup>3</sup>

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1. A. Thwaite, The Desert of Hesperides, an Experience of Libya (London 1969) p.104.

2. E.E. Evans-Pritchard The Sanusi of Cyrenaica (Oxford 1949) p.39.

3. <sup>c</sup>Alī Ridā Pasha was the Wali of Libya from 1867-1870.

that the "judicial system was introduced into coastal towns"<sup>1</sup> but in the countryside the traditional methods of justice based on a mixture of elements of Muslim law with tribal customary practices remained in force.

Because of this independent attitude, helped by the incompetence of Turkish rule, the Libyans, as one writer puts it, were able "to foster a practical self-reliance with which they were to meet the challenge of the 20th century".<sup>2</sup>

At most times the people were left on their own to cope with the hardships of life, and apart from some very isolated cases the Ottoman governors "did not take any direct interest in developing the resources of these provinces".<sup>3</sup> Whatever little improvements may have been achieved at the hands of some Turkish Walis, they remained limited to the coastal areas, most other parts of the country being kept isolated and unaffected by the changes taking place in the world around them and unaware of civilised human progress.

The Turks, did not encourage people to adapt new lifestyles or welcome any change. They stuck to their tribal system and depended on it for security and protection, and this is how the tribal system lived on, with all the negative aspects attached to it, which in later

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1. J. Abun-Nasr, A History of the Maghrib (Cambridge 1975), p.304.

2. John Wright, Libya: A Modern History (London 1982), p.23.

3. Abun-Nasr, op.cit., p.304.



years became a hindrance to the building of a modern society and a modern administration. The position of women did not change throughout the period of Ottoman domination, and this legacy was to have had a retarding effect on modern attempts at change.

Unlike other countries that were experiencing more freedom and progress on the path to modernisation, the country was denied the chance to benefit from the trend of modernisation that was sweeping other Arab countries like Egypt, where it first started. Muhammad <sup>C</sup>Alī established his rule in Egypt in 1805 and embarked on a programme to build a modern state, adapting modern methods and founding a new educational system with secular schools and lessons in science, medicine and engineering.

Meanwhile Tripoli up to the end of the 19th century was still unaware of the cultural transformation that was taking place in the neighbouring countries. The traditional Islamic sciences were the only field of study for the learned men of the country. Al-Hashā'ishī, the Tunisian traveller who visited Tripoli in 1895, made a very frank remark about cultural life in Libya at the time: "As for modern sciences and knowledge, they do not exist at all, not even the smell of them."<sup>1</sup> Yet he acknowledges the activities in the field of religious cultural and education that were taking place at the Sanussi Zāwiya lodge of al-Jaghbūb. He was full of praise for its library, which contained more than 8,000 books, mostly on

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1. <sup>C</sup>Alī al-Misrātī, Rihlat al-Hashā'ishī ilā Lībiyā (Beirut 1965), p.67.

religion: he also expressed his admiration for the effort that went into obtaining these books.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of al-Hashā'ishī's journey, there was one scholar in Tripoli whom al-Hashā'ishī, in spite of his unfavourable attitude towards the city, recognized as a scholar of high calibre. This was Muḥammad Kāmil Muṣṭafā who was a leading figure in the cultural life in the city of Tripoli.<sup>2</sup> At that time he was the Mufti of Tripoli. His book al-Fatāwī, which included autobiographical notes as well as his answers to people's questions about religious matters, was printed in Cairo in 1895, being one of three books written by Libyans and published at that time. The second was a book of verse composed by one of Shaikh Kāmil's students, Muṣṭafā bin Zikrī, and the third was a book on the history of Tripoli written by Aḥmad al-Nā'ib who occupied the top administrative job in Tripoli, being second in command to the Turkish Wali as the Chairman of the Tripoli Municipality. Libya was showing signs of recovering, and the age of awareness in Egypt was slowly and feebly making some impact on the country.

In spite of the authoritarian system of the Turkish Walis, cultural life in Libya by the turn of the century seemed to have taken a course which could not be easily reversed. A few modern schools were already established: the printing press had already made it possible

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1. Ibid., p.153.

2. Ibid., p.69.



for privately owned journals to appear: a public library was opened in the year 1893. This was Libya's first public library and was called the Maktabat al-Awqāf. Sulaymān al-Bārūnī (1870-1940) was another outspoken critic of the Walis. He was asked to leave the country and went to Cairo. Here he issued his newspaper al-Asad al-Islāmī (The Moslem Lion) and his Dīwān was the second book of verse to be printed in Cairo by a Libyan. He only came back after the Young Turk revolution and the restoration of the Ottoman constitution in 1908, when he became a deputy in the newly-founded parliament, among nine members representing all parts of Libya. These deputies were elected freely and this seemed to be the beginning of a new development in the life of Libya, in common with all other Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>1</sup> In the same year a number of journals started publication, expressing their hopes from the new administration and voicing the problems of the people. There was also a growing interest in the arts and the theatre; visiting drama groups from Egypt and Tunisia gave performances of historic plays in Tripoli as we learn from the advertisement and comments appearing in the journals of the day.<sup>2</sup> The editor of Abū Qishsha comments on a visiting group in a very enthusiastic way:

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1. Dalīl al-Mu'allifīn, p.149. See also Za<sup>c</sup>īma al-Bārūnī, Safahāt Khālida min al-Jihād, Cairo 1964.

2. See al-Mirsād (Tripoli) issues 1-22; al-Taraqqī (Tripoli), issue 191.

"the production of these plays is an education by which nations can progress and develop. Enough proof of this is the gains and reforms the English people were able to enjoy as a result of what Shakespeare wrote, for through it we can perceive perfection and distinguish between good and evil."<sup>1</sup>

## EDUCATION

It was only in 1895 that the Ottoman government established four regular primary schools in Tripoli, Benghazi, Derna and Khums. They provided the pupils with modern education encompassing different subjects such as Geography, History and Mathematics, which were taught alongside language and religion.<sup>2</sup> The medium of instruction was Turkish and most of the teachers were Turks, as were most of the students. The duty of providing some education to the people of the country remained in the hands of the Lodges of the Sanussi order.

The significance of the Sanussi order was that it emphasised the idea that the spiritual and the material should be combined, religious piety must be accompanied with deep involvement in daily life and matters concerning the well-being of the community. The

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1. Al-Misrātī, Kifāh Sahafī (Beirut n.d. (1961)) pp.176-177.

2. Francesco Coro, Lībiyā athnā'a al-<sup>c</sup>Ahd al-<sup>c</sup>Uthmānī, (Tripoli 1971) pp.118-9. Translated from Italian Settantasei anni di dominazione Turca in Libia (1835-1911), (Tripoli 1937) by Khalīfa al-Tillīsī.

Shaikhs of the Sanussi order "stimulated improvements in the cultivation of land and the tending of live-stock, arbitrated tribal conflicts and maintained peace and order along caravan routes".<sup>1</sup>

Desert towns and oases were the domain of the Sanussi order. The coastal cities, however, remained unaffected by them. They were already well provided with Quranic schools and centres of religious studies, and in any case the puritanism and the desire to return to the simplicity of the early Islamic period would appeal to the people of the desert more than to the people of the city. Thus, Sanussi centres flourished in the desert areas where they were needed most and where they contributed a great deal to the improvement of the desert people's life.

It was only towards the end of their rule in Libya that the Ottomans started to pay some attention to the introduction of modern regular schools to the province and by the end of the nineteenth century Turkish primary schools providing three years' education were in operation, as well as one Rushdiyya school. This school was established with the primary object of catering for the Turkish officers, providing four more years of further education for their children. M. Nājī, states that by the year 1902 there were 132 pupils attending primary schools for boys and 100 pupils attending primary schools for girls. There was a teachers college

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1. Lorna Hahn, Historical Dictionary of Libya (London 1981), p.66.



of 20 students and a military school of 150 students in addition to the Islamic school of arts and crafts which was a boarding school for 65 pupils mostly orphans. There were also the Al-<sup>C</sup>lrfān institute with 100 students and various other schools with students totalling 490 in Tripoli.<sup>1</sup>

These schools were originally founded to meet the needs of the Turkish community living in Libya, although they also prepared some of the local population to serve in the administration. The language of instruction was Turkish.

As for foreign schools in Tripoli, there were Italian, French and Jewish schools. The most important of these were the Italian schools, five in all, with students totalling 1020 in 1902-3. It must be taken into consideration that other communities sent their children to these schools. There were French schools with a total of 150 students and Jewish schools with a total of 125 students.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE PRESS

The short story is a literary genre which in the Arab world enjoys a close association with the press; in fact it owes its very existence to the emergence of the press. Therefore it is appropriate to try to shed some light on the development of Libyan journals and newspapers during the second Ottoman period, the period

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1. M. Nājī, Ta'rīkh Tarābulus al-Gharb (Benghazi 1970), p.88.

2. A.M. al-Qumātī, Tatawwur al-Idāra al-Ta<sup>C</sup>līmiyya (Tripoli 1978), p.86.

which witnessed the instalment of the first printing press and the publication of the first newspaper.

It was the Ottoman Wali Mahmūd Nādīm Pasha 1860-1866 who bought the first printing press and founded the first newspaper which was named after the Wilāya, Tarābulus al-Gharb. The newspaper was only one sheet carrying the official news of the province, one page in Arabic and the other in Turkish. This newspaper was issued weekly and it remained confined to its official function as the bulletin of the government, even when Alī Ridā Pasha issued in 1869 Sālnāma. This was an annual report concerned solely with official decrees and the newly introduced judicial system: it was also printed in Arabic and Turkish. The situation remained unchanged until July 1897 when one of the Libyan intellectuals named Shaykh Muḥammad al-Būṣayrī started his weekly newspaper al-Taraqqī. Henceforth a real awareness of the new invention of the press began to appear among the public, for the journal did not only concern itself with reporting the official news, but gave also some sort of coverage to all aspects of political, social and cultural life, as well as publishing articles, commentaries and poetry. It also became a forum for the intellectuals of that time; poets like Muṣṭafā Bin Zikrī and Ibrāhīm Bakīr would publish their work in the paper, and writers who would have great impact on the life of the country in later years, men like <sup>c</sup>Uthmān al-Qīzānī, <sup>c</sup>Alī Bin <sup>c</sup>Ayyād and Mahmūd Nājī aired their views. Unfortunately, al-Taraqqī only lasted for one year, as a result of the strict censorship of



the Sultan <sup>C</sup>Abd al-Hamīd in Istanbul. Although the newspaper was unable to continue at this time it did reappear after the restoration of the Ottoman constitution and became the voice of the Union and Progress Party and its powerful spokesman in the country. In January 1899 the first magazine was issued under instructions from the then Wali of Tripoli, Nāmiq Pasha (1898-1899). The magazine was called Funūn and was edited by Dā'ūd Afandī, being published in conjunction with the newly founded School of Islamic Arts and Crafts. It covered sciences, new inventions, zoology and astronomy. This showed clearly the awareness in the minds of the people of the country of the technical age and their desire to become part of it. The magazine was stopped as a result of the transfer of the Wali, Nāmiq Pasha, who initiated it, having lasted for just one year, after which its editor left for Istanbul.<sup>1</sup> The autocratic era of Sultan <sup>C</sup>Abd al-Hamīd did not allow such activities to flourish and prosper. There were no other journals published until the year 1908 when the constitution was restored under the Young Turks and a new life was generated in the political and cultural environment of Libya. During a period of four years, from the summer of 1908 until October 1911 when Italy invaded Libya, the cultural and intellectual life of the country witnessed a great development. The Libyan press was going through what has been described as its Golden Age. Al-Taraqqī the journal that appeared

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1. A.S. al-Dajjānī, Libiyā Qubayl al-Ihtilāl al-Ītālī, (Tripoli N.D.), p.279.

in 1897 and was suppressed, immediately resumed publication, bought a printing press of its own, and its offices became a meeting place for the country's intelligentsia, and its columns advocated justice, equality and fraternity. The use of this motto of the Young Turk movement reveals the association of the paper with the movement and its role as the voice of the Committee of Union and Progress.

In 1910 another, more radical, weekly was issued; its owner, Muḥammad al-Bārūdī, called it al-<sup>c</sup>Asr al-Jadīd (The New Age). Its slogan was "a newspaper that is written by the people for the people" and it served as a platform for the educated youth of the country. The slogan of the journal reflects the new consciousness of the educated people and their demands for a role in the running of their country's affairs. It advocated an increased participation by the people in political life and the introduction of Islamic democracy based on the shūrā system. The newspaper adopted the line followed by the Egyptian newspaper al-Liwā as against the political line advocated by al-Mu'ayyad which shows the influence of Egyptian political thinking on Libyan writers of the time. This influence is evident in most newspapers of the period, for they all re-published articles from Egyptian newspapers.

Muḥammad al-Nā'ib, the son of the exiled historian, Aḥmad, al-Nā'ib also issued a weekly newspaper called al-Kashshāf. The editor was one of the leading intellectuals of Tripoli, and it is not surprising, therefore, that the newspaper used highly



sophisticated arguments in defending the rights of the citizen, acquired in the newly-restored constitution.

There was also the humorous journal Abū Qishsha which was published in 1908 by al-Hāshimī Abū Qishsha, a Tunisian journalist who had fled the censorship of the French authorities in Tunisia and came to Tripoli to resume his activities. He became involved in heated arguments and debates, expressing his views in an ardent manner and causing himself much harrassment in the courts because of writs issued against him. He entered into personal clashes with one of his previous editors, Maḥmūd Nadīm bin Mūsā, who founded his own newspaper, al-Raqīb, which was issued a few months before the Italian occupation. It continued publication in Istanbul, and in later years resumed publication in Tripoli under the Italian rule. Al-Raqīb was yet another expression of the spirit of the era, engaging in political arguments about the basis of government, drawing comparisons between eastern and western countries, and urging Muslims to catch up with the West.

Another very important journal was issued a few months before the Italian occupation of Libya, al-Mirṣād, was owned and edited by Shaykh Aḥmad al-Fiṣṣātuwī, who studied in Egypt and on his return to Libya started contributing articles to the existing journals. In mid-1911 he started his own newspaper and judging by the few issues that are extant in the library of the Libyan Museum, it was a radical newspaper which repeatedly warned of the imminent invasion of the Italians. It adopted a style which was simpler and more direct than that of all other newspapers. Al-Mirṣād was a big step



forward in presentation and quality. As the preparation for the Italian military attack began, Ahmad al-Fiṣṣāṭuwī directed his readers' attention towards exposing the Italian scheme for Libya. He was also a great advocate of social equality, attacking those people who accumulated wealth while others suffered.

These, therefore, were the most important journals published in Tripoli in the Arabic language to emerge during the brief gap between two alien systems of government, a breathing space that lasted for four brief years before the country found itself under the yoke of Italian colonialism.

There were also journals published in other languages and catering for the interest of foreign groups and communities. Among these, but somewhat of an exception, was a journal published in Turkish but catering mainly for the welfare of the Libyan people. It was called Ta<sup>c</sup>mīm-i Hurriyat and took upon itself the role of mediator between the Libyan people and their Ottoman governors. It was edited by a Libyan who was educated in Turkey, Muḥammad Qadrī, and was of a limited circulation of 350 copies. It nevertheless exerted a considerable influence. In an article published in al-Afkār, Qadrī's son remembers how his father's newspaper entered into a political battle with the Wali and that the newspaper was powerful enough to have the Wali dismissed.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Ahmad Rāsim Qadrī, "al-Nahḍa al-Fikriyya fī Lībiyā", al-Afkār October, 1957, p.16.

Even before the Italian occupation, Italian interest in the country was made explicit through the large number of Italian newspapers published in Tripoli. There were five Italian journals. Two of them came out twice weekly: they were Il Giornale di Tripoli and L'Eco di Tripoli. Both were founded in 1909. Another journal, which was issued a year later was called L'Economista. There existed at the same time a humorous journal called La Stella. All of these served to prepare for the Italian scheme of occupying Libya, but one journal, Il Progresso, which was published in Italian ~~was~~ edited by an anti-imperialist journalist who made it its business to attack and oppose the Italian plans for Libya. The editor of this journal was deported from the country once the Italians took over.

There was also a weekly journal serving the Jewish community called al-Dardanīl, owned by a Jewish businessman and edited by the Tunisian journalist who produced Abū Qishsha. All these activities were concentrated in the capital city of the province, Tripoli; according to Francesco Coro there were no printing presses or journals at that time in any other place in the Wilāya.<sup>1</sup>

The country was seething with ideas, debates, political discussions and arguments, in an atmosphere of tolerance and social peace and coherence that existed between these various communities. As Ahmad Rasīm Qadrī puts it, "a spirit of mutual understanding and

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1. Francesco Coro, Lībiyā athnā'a al-<sup>c</sup>Ahd al-<sup>c</sup>Uthmānī, p.157.

co-operation prevailed in the country between the native people and foreign communities, no matter what race, religion or school of thought they belonged to".<sup>1</sup>

The Arabic journals provided a unique chance for varied styles and means of expression to emerge and develop. They published news as well as linguistic and religious studies. Their style had now become liberated from the traditional and heavy dominance of saj<sup>c</sup>. A new style, light, expressive, humorous sometimes, and mostly clear and concise was emerging, bringing the written language into closer touch with everyday life.

It was the beginning of a literary and cultural revival; taking its cue from the new spirit that was prevailing in the Arab world, with Egypt holding the torch. The Libyan writer and historian Khalīfa al-Tillīsī wrote when describing the period: "The country witnessed a literary revival most manifested in classical studies, the publication of a number of newspapers and the emergence of literary trends influencing and being influenced by the ones that already existed in the East."<sup>2</sup> The dominant mode of literary expression was poetry, but there were also important studies on language and religion.<sup>3</sup> Journals of the period also covered the sciences, exploration and astronomy. They also took care to

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1. Ahmad Rāsim Qadrī, op.cit.

2. Khalīfa al-Tillīsī, Rihla<sup>c</sup> Abr al-Kalimāt (Tripoli 1973), p.161.

3. Loc.cit.



establish links with other Arab countries, especially Egypt, where some editors of these newspapers, like Bin Mūsā and al-Fiṣṣātuwī had their education. Influences from other countries brought new ideas and schools of thought, although the conservative and traditional outlook that favoured the past and feared change remained dominant.

This cultural and political awareness was very short-lived as the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire was in progress. The efforts and preparations of the Italians were well under way, and the whole country was about to be plunged back in a pool of darkness after it had witnessed a brief glimpse of enlightenment. For all the debates and arguments and most cultural and intellectual activities were to come to an abrupt halt on the 3rd October 1911.

#### THE ITALIAN OCCUPATION

Italy's declared intention to annex Libya was known long before it felt powerful enough to send its fleet to the shores of Libya to take it by force. It had been looking for a Mediterranean colony since losing Tunisia which was taken over by France in 1881. In fact the intention of occupying Libya became after that date an obsession with successive Italian Governments and was considered a matter of national honour. From that time onwards the successive Italian governments laid down the groundwork for the eventual invasion of Libya. This groundwork consisted of diplomatic Italian agreements with other European nations, the settlement of Italian

immigrants in Libya and economic penetration through the Banco di Roma. The Italian press meanwhile manipulated public opinion in Italy so as to assure any government popular support in the event of an annexation.

In preparing for eventual political control in Libya the Italian government encouraged the Banco di Roma to play an increasing economic role in the country. The Banco Di Roma, which was established in Libya in 1907, embarked on large financial schemes and arrangements to achieve the Government's aims for economic penetration. It started by sponsoring Italian enterprises in the country, founding two esparto grass mills in Tripoli and Benghazi, and purchasing agricultural lands and freely lending money to landowners. The people of the country were alarmed by this activity of the Bank and sent to the Ottoman Wali a petition signed by about 300 people. They demanded that the Ottoman Bank should provide funds to counter the activities of the Banco di Roma. There was throughout the country a fear of Italian penetration. Unfortunately the Libyan demand for better protection and more forces to defend the country went unheeded. When the Italian onslaught on Libya finally took place on the 3rd October 1911, the Turkish force defending the country numbered a mere 4,000 soldiers scattered over many stations alongside the shores and inland.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Khalīfa al-Tillīsī, Mu<sup>c</sup>jam Ma<sup>c</sup>ārik al-Jihād fī Lībiyā, 1911-1931, 3rd edition (Beirut 1973), p.23.



The Ottoman troops were unable to resist the invasion and soon withdrew leaving the Libyan people to come to terms with their new masters. This they were unwilling to do and for the next twenty years the Italians had to put down a series of revolts against their authority. The Italians reacted by savage reprisals against the civilian population, but this was only to exacerbate the struggle. Neither the Turkish surrender nor the Italian savageness was to prevent the people of the country from waging uncompromising war against the invading army. In Cyrenaica the Sanussi movement started organising the people to fight under the leadership of Ahmad al-Sharīf, while in Tripoli the chiefs of the local districts and tribes organised the resistance. The Libyan war with Italy went through three phases charted as follows by Prof. N. Ziadeh "the first extending from 1911 to 1917, followed by a second phase stretching to 1923 which was a period of negotiation and agreements. Then came the third and last phase, which began in 1923 and ended in 1932 by which time all Libya had been occupied by the Italians."<sup>1</sup>

The first phase was marked by heavy fighting. As they were limited in resources, with very primitive weaponry, the Libyan fighters resorted to guerilla warfare, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy forces. The hilly nature of Cyrenaica facilitated guerilla warfare and brought better results than in Tripoli. The resistance

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1. N. Ziadeh, Sanusiyah a Study in a revivalist movement in Islam (Leiden 1958), p.69.



succeeded in keeping the Italians confined to the coastline, unable to penetrate into the interior. However, in Tripoli, in spite of the fierce resistance, they were able to penetrate into the country towards Fazzan, which they reached in 1914. The Italians inflicted great suffering on the population wherever their troops went.

However in a series of battles the forces of the resistance drove the Italians out of Fazzan to their bases on the coastline.

In the course of their efforts to bring the country under their control the Italians tried to exploit the poverty of the people by raising an army from the local population to be used against the Mujāhidīn. An army manned by Libyans under the command of Ramaḍān al-Suwayhilī was got ready to go into action in a major battle against the Mujāhidīn, but as soon as the battle started, instead of attacking the forces of the Mujāhidīn, Ramaḍān al-Suwayhilī led his troops in an attack against his allies in the war, the Italian forces. This surprising and dramatic development which the Italians had not anticipated lost for the Italians not only the battle but very nearly the war. The battle of al-Qirdābiyya is considered the greatest and the most important in the history of the Libyan struggle against the Italians. The resistance started to enjoy more favourable conditions, military help was also forthcoming from Italy's adversaries in the First World War, namely Germany and Turkey, while the Italians, caught between their involvement in the war and the ever strengthening Libyan resistance, were on the verge of losing their new colony entirely.

In Cyrenaica, meanwhile, Ahmad al-Sharīf led his forces to attack British military posts on the Egyptian border, encouraged obviously by the Turks, in order to weaken their enemy in the war. The move was unsuccessful and ill-advised and could have brought disastrous consequences had it not been averted very quickly. It still cost Ahmad al-Sharīf his post as the leader of the Sanussi order and the Commander of their fighting force. However, Libyan fighters continued their war against Italy. By the beginning of August 1915 the Italians held only four coastal towns in Tripolitania while in Cyrenaica no garrison was more than thirty kilometres from the sea.

The second phase of the Italian-Libyan war came when the Italians realized that they were fighting an unwinnable war in which heavy losses had already been inflicted and which they were maintaining at an enormous cost. Italy was at that time just emerging from the First World War, and seemed to have felt that, in order to win time, she should try playing the political game as long as she was losing the military game. It was Italy's foreign Minister who therefore announced that the time had come for direct co-operation with the native population, granting them civil and political rights.<sup>1</sup> Encouraged by this Italian attitude, the Libyan resistance engaged in a series of agreements and negotiations in the hope that they might secure independence through peaceful means.

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1. Majid Khadduri, Modern Libya: a Study in Political Development (Baltimore 1963), p.17.



In Cyrenaica the newly-appointed leader of the Sanussi Order Idrīs al-Sanūsī, led the negotiation with the Italians. While in Tripoli, the leaders of the resistance, among them al-Bārūnī and Ramadān al-Suwayhīlī, tried to reach an agreement with the Italians. The Italians granted the Libyans a degree of participation in a future administration but meanwhile a republic was declared in Tripoli and the Italians agreed that Idrīs al-Sanūsī would be recognised as Amīr of Cyrenaica.

In order not to play into the hands of the enemy, who would be more than pleased to see Libya split into two halves, and as a step towards achieving the complete unity of the country, the republicans of Tripoli at their conference in Gharyān in November 1921 decided to offer the leadership of their province to the already established leader of Cyrenaica, Idrīs al-Sanūsī, and to create him the Amīr of the whole country. Idrīs, aware of the possible Italian reaction to this and of the dangers of unifying the efforts of the resistance and ever-conscious of the responsibilities it would entail, as the Italians had already resumed the fighting in some quarters, was reluctant to respond in earnest to the call. Although he accepted the offer in words he failed to support his words with action and left the country to live in Egypt, thus exposing the national resistance to chaos and lack of leadership. However sporadic fighting gradually escalated and full-scale hostilities were renewed and whatever rights were granted to the Libyans were now gradually withdrawn. The coming to power of the Fascists in



Rome on 28th October 1922 killed any chance of a peaceful solution to the renewed conflict. Thus opened a new chapter in the Italian bid to occupy Libya, a chapter which was coloured with blood and marked with human suffering and misery. It lasted for ten years, during which the Fascist Generals, in their determination to destroy the resistance, resorted to every possible means to achieve their aim.

Surrounded by the hostile environment of the desert and faced with the might and power of a modern Army, the Libyans waged their war of liberation with no regular troops. Ordinary civilians joined the ranks of the resistance and turned the entire country into a battlefield. In Cyrenaica, the fighting was led by <sup>C</sup>Umar al-Mukhtār, an elderly school teacher turned guerilla commander who engaged the Italians in continuous warfare for nine years with a small number of fighters.

The Italians concentrated their forces on Misrāta the capital of the Tripolitanian republic which they captured after a year's struggle against the Libyan forces led by Sa<sup>C</sup>dūn al-Suwayhīlī. When Misrāta fell, the Italians then turned to the desert areas which they pacified step by step. Finally the Italian forces, now led by the notorious Graziani, turned on Cyrenaica which they captured only after the extremes of brutality towards the civilian population. <sup>C</sup>Umar al-Mukhtār was captured and executed in September 1931 and in January 1932 the Governor General of Libya, Marshal Badoglio, was able to announce that the Italian war in Libya had been brought to a successful conclusion.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS

To achieve their aim of creating the "fourth shore", the Italians embarked upon an ambitious programme to develop lands for agriculture and to bring enough peasants from different parts of Italy, but mostly Sicily, to make out of them the landowners and the new population of Libya. By the early Twenties a large part of the country was already pacified, and brought under Italian control; it was possible then to start changing the nature of society in Libya. At the time of the arrival of the Fascists Italian land acquisition was less than 10,000 hectares, but it reached 180,000 hectares in 1929.<sup>1</sup> These lands were either confiscated from Libyans joining the resistance, or new lands were made cultivable by the Italians themselves. There were also the publicly owned lands which had previously belonged to the Turkish administration and had now become the property of the Italian government. These lands were distributed among the new settlers, who were also given financial aid in order to help their newly constructed farms to flourish. There were large investments designated solely for settlers and a law was brought into force which stated clearly that public lands suitable for agriculture could only be allocated to Italians.<sup>2</sup>

The twenty years of war and destruction left the Libyans poor, dispossessed and downtrodden. Many fled the country and those who

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1. John Wright, Libya: A Modern History, p.37.

2. Abun-Nasr, The History of the Magrib (Cambridge 1975), p.385.



stayed on fell back upon their old ways of life, and had to rely on primitive means of production. They were not to play a major part in the colonial scheme as conceived by the Italians. Life in Libya was geared towards creating a better environment for the Italian settlers. The Libyans were only there to provide cheap labour either in the new farms owned by the Italian settlers, or for construction work, new buildings to house Italians, new roads, military barracks, or even as conscripts in the army to fight in the Abyssinian war. Libya was at that time run for the benefit of the Italians.

During the Italian occupation most of the people, except for a very small percentage who had thrown their lot in with the Italians, lived on the verge of starvation. In the main, life for Libyans was mere survival. People used to live on dates for months, or grains of barley roasted and eaten as a meal. Outside the cities people depended on the rainy season to plough the earth, sewing wheat or barley, as well as grazing their livestock. In the oases they would supplement their income with the fruits of their palm trees. Those who lived in the cities would mostly work as a cheap labour for the Italians; a small proportion of them were shopkeepers and craftsmen. Apart from the short period of the interrupted peace agreements, between the years 1917 and 1922, the people were deprived of any political rights,



and exposed to continual harrassment and suppression. Libyans under Italian rule led the life of a "submerged" population.<sup>1</sup>

A policy of racial discrimination was applied against the Libyans. As second class citizens they had to abide by certain laws and rules different from those applied to other nationalities. Among these rules were the following:<sup>2</sup>

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1. Nothing could better illustrate this situation than this passage from an account of the traveller (Freya Stark) visiting Benghazi before the Second World War.

"Colonial Italians strolling in family phalanxes at leisure after the working hours of the day... and here I gradually began to be puzzled. Something was missing and I noticed that it was the raucous Arab voice of the Levant. The crowds in a silence that sounded European to anyone familiar with the East... I discovered a boot-black... when he had done polishing my shoes I thanked him in Arabic; he looked at me, startled, and fled without being paid. I began to feel the quagmire beneath this gay little town, a deadening substratum of fear. 'There must be Arabs somewhere', I thought and spent what remained of the daylight trying to find them, and did eventually, in a little ghetto of squalid streets far back from the sea. A throttled horror made me wish never to visit Benghazi again."

See Freya Stark, The Coast of Incense (London 1953), p.162.

2. A lengthy account of all these measures can be found in Sulaymān Hasan Mahmūd, Lībiyā bayn al-Mādī wa-al-Hādir (Cairo 1962), pp.238-241.

1. Libyans were prevented from entering cafés or restaurants or clubs used or frequented by Italians. Entry to these places was only allowed to Libyan servants.
2. A Libyan had to salute any Italian he met in the street.
3. Libyans were prevented from sending their children to secondary schools (except in very special cases).
4. Libyans were also prevented from riding a taxi or a carriage driven by an Italian driver.
5. They were also prevented from travelling first class.
6. It was forbidden for a Libyan to ask an Italian boot-black to polish his shoes.
7. All streets and places were to be given Italian names.

There was no prospect of improvement in the Libyans' condition under the fascist rule, because, as the racial laws of 1938 and the special citizenship law of 1939 stated clearly, the Italian colonial regime, like other European colonial regimes, had no intentions of granting genuine economic or civic equality.<sup>1</sup> The Libyan labourer was not to be protected by the laws that protected the Italian labourer. He was not to benefit from any regulations or legislation regarding hours of work, holidays, social insurances, or apprenticeship etc. Libyan workers were regarded as serfs when working on Italian estates.

As regarding their achievements and development plans, the Italians, during the last ten years of their rule, succeeded in

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1. Claudio Segré, Fourth Shore (Chicago 1974), p.184.



transforming the country completely. They created modern services and amenities, introduced new means of communication, used their skill and know-how in creating farms, and turned barren areas into fertile land. In common with other colonial powers, the Italians introduced European technology and industrial organization which was used to the full in constructing roads, and building houses and churches with typical Italian architecture and finesse. Even the ruins of Leptis Magna were restored with great care, the road that links Tripoli with Benghazi, was completed, and this offered an occasion for Mussolini himself to visit Tripoli and declare the new road open.

It was Marshal Italo Balbo who was responsible for most of the civic achievements in Libya. He became Governor of the United Colony of Libya in 1934. He had no particular concern for converting Muslims to Christianity, but he was most anxious to convert them to fascism. Instead of Graziani's policy of extermination, Balbo pursued a policy of assimilation. It was under him that the Italian population of the colony became 110,000, with 225,000 hectares being developed in Tripoli and Benghazi for their benefit.<sup>1</sup> In fact it was under his rule, as the most vigorous and active governor, that the Fascism programme for the demographic colonization of the country gained momentum. The plan was that there would soon be enough peasants brought from Italy to outnumber the local population, and

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1. John Wright, Libya - A Modern History, p.38.



that this would result in the absorption and assimilation of the Libyan people.

In order to eliminate any potential trouble that might arise in the future from the tribal system, the Italians did their best to destroy the structure of the Qabīla which they held responsible for keeping the Libyan resistance alive for a long time and for fostering the independent attitude among the people. The Italian aim was to turn the bedouin into peasants, tenants of the state and wage-labourers.<sup>1</sup> They started by taking away the tribal land which was used for pasturing and sowing and turned it into farms for their people.<sup>2</sup> They also appointed their own shaykhs to undermine the authority of the traditional ones and to ensure that these new shaykhs would be loyal to the government. These measures were helped by the introduction of the Italian language as the only language of the country instead of Arabic; the people were forced all over the country to make the effort to learn it. The ultimate aim of Italy was to transform Libya into an extension of the mother country.

For their part, the Libyans treated their occupiers as if they were non-existent. Now that the military resistance was subdued, the Libyans followed a policy of passive resistance. They went about their affairs not giving much attention to whatever programmes

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1. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, The Sanusi of Cyrenaica, (Oxford 1949), p.199.

2. Loc.cit.

the Italians had for them, falling back upon their traditional customary ways, grazing their herds, sowing their crops, making use of the wool and skins of their animals. They also refrained from mixing with the Italians and did not even send their children to the Italian primary schools that were set up especially for them. Instead they sent them to mosques or Quranic schools, or to no school at all.

By means of this natural defence mechanism they rejected everything Italian, or connected with the Italians or bearing their mark. They kept away from the main streets, avoided going to Italian market places, rejected their language and culture. They refused to adapt themselves to the new way of life that was imposed on them, holding as tightly as they could to their traditions and customs, their folk music, their religious festivities and occasions. If one of their members drifted with the current and consciously or subconsciously imitated the Italian ways, he would be considered a traitor to his race and faith, socially rejected and condemned. Personal friendships between members of the communities were very rare.

In spite of the imposition of the Italian language, there was a very small percentage of the population who spoke it when the Italians left. Although some Italian words, especially technical terms, did become part of the Libyan dialect they were soon wiped out after the Arabization of technical words. The two communities kept away from each other; there was little intermarriage between them, and the very few cases happened only after the end of Italian



rule. Although this total rejection of everything Italian helped preserve the country's character and personality, it did so at a very great cost, for it hindered the development and progress of social and intellectual life. It was a choice between two evils: to stay backward, refusing the chance to improve the quality of your thought and ideas, but with the country's identity preserved; or to benefit from the culture of the colonial country, acquiring a new knowledge and learning, yet running the risk of being assimilated and absorbed by another culture. The popular instinct chose the first as the less harmful of the two evils. It is regrettable that social habits and practices should have remained at a standstill with no chance to be exposed to modern ideas and thought. The result was a closed society with a rigid mentality and fossilized traditions. Therefore it was no wonder that the Italians should leave the country after more than thirty years without any real influence on the Libyan people's way of life.

But the benefits seem, in the eyes of some observers, to have outweighed the disadvantages, as in the words of a western observer:

"The exclusionary and discriminatory Italian colonial policies, however, protected Libya from a heavy imprint of Italian culture, consequently the country largely escaped the problems of cultural dualism that plague other North African nations."<sup>1</sup>

Although the major cities on the coastline were more exposed to new ideas and influences of different cultures and civilizations,

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1. Richard F. Nyrop and others, Area Handbook for Libya, 2nd ed. (Washington 1973), p.93.



Libyan society remained at that time basically bedouin, provincial and rural. The cities did not exert a great influence over the interior; instead the desert nature of Libya seems to have had the upper hand, for the tribal structure extended to relations inside these cities. That can only be explained in the light of the colonial experience: cities would become the property of the invading forces, while the interior belonged to the natives. The client class of native merchants or employees who resided in the city remained always a very small minority, unable to influence the course of things. The position of woman in society could serve here as a good example, showing how the city abides by the same rules that are practised in the remotest and most backward desert oasis. Whereas cities are expected to take the leading role in liberating the social system by being a step ahead of the countryside in terms of modernization and innovation, in Libya the condition of women in the city remains very similar to that of women in the countryside. In some cases a woman in the village would enjoy more freedom due to the outdoor life in the countryside.

Although the Italians brought with them an open society which gave women the chance to participate in social life and mix with men and enjoy the same rights as the man does, the Libyan women remained unaffected. Possibly people at the time had more of a tendency to keep their women walled inside the house in order not to expose them to the whims of a strayed soldier of the invading forces, and the shame and dishonour that this would bring upon their families, and

consequently the position of women remained as it was under Ottoman rule, that is, inferior to that of the man. The family as an institution remained a very sacred one; major decisions in the life of the individual, like marriage or divorce, were always decided by the family, whether concerning a man or a woman.

Although the successive occupations by different foreign forces did not allow the country the social or political stability necessary for development, Libyan society did emerge with one gain, that is, a society with no social differences and divisions between the people. They have all experienced the same hardship and received the same treatment and were subjected to the same resentment and suppression. This coherence of the shared experience helped in creating a classless society, as in the words of Mr Anthony Thwaite, who lived among the Libyans for a few years: "The general condition of poverty and subservience achieved a tasteless and classless levelling unique in the Arab world."<sup>1</sup> The result of this, as he witnessed, still can be seen today: "The attitude and behaviour of Libyans to one another is truly democratic. They have no notion of one man being 'better' than another because of birth or position."<sup>2</sup> Ruth First, who also visited the country a few times, was able to observe:

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1. Anthony Thwaite, The Deserts of Hesperides, (London 1969), p.105.

2. Loc.cit.

"By comparison with post-colonial states in which there are competing interests between indigenous bourgeoisie, landed classes, peasantry, proletariat and petit-bourgeoisie, Libya's social formation is relatively simple; and the state's role as mediator between the interests of conflicting groups, relatively uncomplicated."<sup>1</sup>

The socio-economic life suffered a great deal as a result of the Italian policy which deprived the country of its most valuable asset, namely its élite, who fled to different Arab and Muslim countries. Socially as well as economically, life in Libya would definitely have been richer and more resourceful had its élite stayed on.

#### EDUCATION

When the Italians left the country, illiteracy was estimated at 94 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Large numbers of the six per cent who had some education achieved it by attending Quranic schools. Those who went to Italian schools were very few, and they were prevented from getting any education beyond the elementary level, except for a very limited number of pupils favoured for their families' services to the Italian authorities. The Italians had their reasons for doing this, as in the opinion of some observers, 'The colonial administration was to restrict the number of Libyans

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1. Ruth First, Libya, the Elusive Revolution, (Harmondsworth 1974) p.250.

2. John Wright, Libya, A Modern History, p.250.



educated beyond the primary stage'<sup>1</sup> lest they become a source of trouble in the future; it only wanted people limited in their scope and knowledge, loyal to the Italians, so they could fill some administrative jobs.

Regarding the quality of these schools, the Italians built schools even in the remote oases of the interior,<sup>2</sup> which would have been a great achievement had it not been for the policy set for these schools, where the main purpose was to foster Italian ideas in place of Libyan nationalism. The Italianization programme for these schools intensified after the Fascists took over. The new objective was to turn the students into Fascist cadets rather than to introduce education to the Libyan people. This was the major reason why the Libyans stayed away from these schools.

At these schools Libyan children were made to salute the Italian flag and to recite the Italian anthem which was composed in Arabic especially for the benefit of Libyan students expressing their loyalty to Italian Fascism. This made parents frightened to send their children to the schools, lest they lose their Islamic faith, and in doing so they were encouraged by the religious teachers in the Quranic schools.

The Italian education in Libya passed through two stages, the period before the Fascists took office and the period after that.

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1. Richard Nyrop and others, Area Handbook of Libya, p.115.

2. Salem Ali Hijjaji, The New Libya, (Tripoli 1967), p.82.

In the first stage, the country was still either engaged in heavy fighting or political negotiation, and the Italians were only able to establish their rule along the coastal area. Towards the end of the period, in the year 1922-1923, there were fourteen elementary schools and eight secondary schools. In the year 1921-22 the total of Libyan students in elementary schools was 611 while those attending secondary schools numbered 26 only. As for technical training, which was available at Islamic schools of Arts and Crafts, there were 150 Libyan students. During this period the Italian authorities were more tolerant towards Arabic education.<sup>1</sup>

As soon as the Fascists took office they started undertaking the change of the education system in Italy as well as in the colonies. The law that was issued in 1927 cancelled all the privileges granted to Libyans and the process of Italianizing the Libyan people began afresh, but this time with a greater intensity and sense of purpose. Now, schools cared only for Italian education, abandoning any Arabic education. Assistance to Quranic or religious schools was withdrawn and schools beyond the elementary level for Libyans were banned. The Italians also opposed the long tradition of people travelling to al-Azhar in Egypt and to al-Zaytūna in Tunisia in pursuit of higher education. Instead they directed them to attend the Superior School of Islamic Culture, which was set up for them in 1938, and which the

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1. A.M. al-Qumātī, Tatawwur al-Idāra al-Ta<sup>c</sup>līmiyya (Tripoli 1978), p.133.

Libyans were very suspicious of as the whole policy was orientated towards abolishing Arabic and Islamic culture altogether.

The number of Italians receiving education in Libya increased from 3,000 students in 1924 to 16,000 in 1939 while the number of Libyan students at the end of the Italian rule was 10,000. The school programme for Libyans was five years in the cities, and three years in the villages.<sup>1</sup>

It would seem therefore that the Italian policy of assimilation had failed completely, in the face of the refusal of the indigenous population to take advantage of an education alien to their traditional values and beliefs.

The Italians by their aggressive programme of assimilation made the people of the country suspect the value of modern schools, and drove them to take refuge in these primitive forms of learning. Nevertheless, with all its limitations and defects, the Quranic school contributed a great deal to the spiritual life of the country, making it possible for the Libyan people to maintain their Islamic faith and to remain such a deeply religious people.

So much for the fortunate six per cent who were able to escape illiteracy, but what about the rest of the population who remained chained in their ignorance, unable to benefit from man's most valuable invention, the alphabet? In fact, there was nothing much in terms of open debates or social clubs or public meetings which

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1. Ahmad al-Funayyish, al-Mujtama<sup>c</sup> al-Lībī wa-Mushkilātuh (Tripoli 1967), p.77.



educated men could use as educational venues. Again people fell back upon their traditions, their oral didactic stories and folk tales and popular music, above all their vernacular poetry, which was their means of recording the major events of their history and their medium of expressing their emotions and feelings.

## CULTURAL LIFE

Under the circumstances we have described in previous sections, it is clear that the country did not have much opportunity to enjoy an active cultural life, as the Libyan historian and critic Khalīfa al-Tillisi writes:

Since the landing of the Italian troops on the shores of Libya on the 5th October 1911, until the day when Badoglio issued his famous statement after the execution of <sup>c</sup>Umar al-Mukhtār announcing the end of the Libyan resistance, the Libyan people left their word for the sword and their poems for the battlefield.<sup>1</sup>

The Egyptian academic Ṭāhā al-Ḥājirī who has written on cultural life of Libya arrived at the same conclusion:

If we were to ask how was the general condition during this period, we would find it was a period of mere struggle and fighting, heroic resistance to liberate the country from the invading forces, where there was no room for anything else.<sup>2</sup>

This meant that cultural activities during the first two decades of the Italian rule were almost non-existent. Whatever cultural

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1. Khalīfa al-Tillisi, Rihla <sup>c</sup>abr al-Kalimāt (Tripoli 1973), p.164.

2. Ṭāhā al-Ḥājirī, al-Hayāt al-Adabiyya fī Lībiyā (Cairo 1962), p.85.

revival had existed before the Italian invasion and was manifest in the publication of a number of newspapers during the last few years of Ottoman rule, came to an abrupt halt as soon as the Italians took over. Cultural and political journals ceased publication immediately; their writers either left the country or joined the ranks of the resistance. The small intellectual class that was just emerging and making its impact on the life of the country had suddenly disappeared. The rising stars of its literary movement went into oblivion, and the whole nation's effort was directed towards the battle against the invading army. The only form of literature that existed was the poetry of the resistance, although there was no medium or platform where it could be published in the initial years of the war; it was either relayed vocally, or through letters, or recited in private gatherings. However, most of the poems composed at this period were published in later years. A poet like Sulaymān al-Bārūnī, for instance, was a leading personality in the war of liberation, yet he found time to write poetry which he sent to his friends outside the country for publication or for safe-keeping. His poetry was directly inspired by his close involvement in battle and his personal experience of it. He continued to write and fight until he died in exile in India in 1940. In Cyrenaica the poets of the Sanussi order were writing poetry to enhance the fighting spirit of the nation. Prominent among them was Muḥammad <sup>c</sup>Abd-Allāh al-Sunnī (1860-1929) who used to be called the poet of the



Sanussi order.<sup>1</sup> His poetry is a record of the Sanussi wars, especially those that were led by Ahmad al-Sharīf.

His poetry shows his interest in the international events which led to the annexation of his homeland by the Italians. In one poem he addresses the international community which allowed the Italians to violate the charter drawn up at The Hague.<sup>2</sup>

The only cultural activity during those two decades came with the truce in the fighting that was concluded between the Libyans and the Italians in the years 1918 to 1922, when the intellectuals of the country, taking advantage of the truce, established in Tripoli the National Party of Reform (Ḥizb al-Islāh al-Waṭanī), through which they were able to inject some life into the dead cultural scene. It was a political and cultural organization which formed its own school, and founded the literary club headed by Ahmad al-Faqīh Ḥasan, and as soon as the Italian law of June 1919 came out granting the Libyans some civic liberties and limited self-rule, it issued its own newspaper, al-Liwā' al-Tarābulusī, which became the voice of the nationalist movement in Libya and a platform for all the patriotic forces in the country to express and advocate their ideas,<sup>3</sup> and a real manifestation of the Arabic and Islamic

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1. See Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq <sup>c</sup>Afīfī, al-Ittijahāt al-Waṭaniyya fī al-Shi<sup>c</sup>r al-Lībī al-Ḥadīth (Beirut 1969), pp.213-14.

2. Ibid. p.213.

3. Ahmad Rāsim Qadrī "al-Nahḍa al-Fikriyya fī Lībiyā" al-Afkār January, 1958, p.22.



character of the Libyan resistance. The editorship of the newspaper was given to <sup>C</sup>Uthmān al-Qīzānī, an intellectual of the period who kept faithful to his ideals and principles.

Poets like Ahmad Qunāba made their first appearances in the newspaper,<sup>1</sup> and it published articles by leading personalities like Sulaymān al-Bārūnī, and the Egyptian <sup>C</sup>Abd-al-Rahmān <sup>C</sup>Azzām. It spoke for the whole country, West and East. Among its first contributors, for instance, was the poet of the Sanussi order Muḥammad al-Sunnī. It exposed Italian policies and schemes, trying to create an awareness among the people regarding the dangers ahead of them. For three years it kept pursuing its task as a banner of freedom, until the truce collapsed and the Italian attack was renewed.

The Fascists made their advance, and every cultural institution that had any contact with the patriotic movement, whether it was a school, a newspaper, or a literary club, was promptly banned and

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1. His poems were published mainly in al-Liwā' al-Tarābulusī, a poem entitled "Fa li-Tunsifunā al-Layālī" (7 April, 1921) signed by an "Ardent Nationalist", another entitled "Fī Samā' al-Majd" (21 April, 1921) signed by "A Tripolitanian" and others published under various pseudonyms (19 May; 3 June; 21 August; 29 September; 6 October and 24 November of 1921) all attack the Italians in vitriolic language. These poems have been collected by al-Sayd Abū Dīb into the Dīwān Ahmad Qunāba (Tripoli 1968).

closed down. The only newspaper that came out at the same time as al-Liwā' al-Tarābulusī was al-Waqt, edited by Muḥsin Zāfir, who published it independently and attacked the colonial policies vehemently. "The publication of this newspaper took everyone by surprise"<sup>1</sup> as it was very outspoken and very forceful in attacking Italian colonialism. It met the same fate as al-Liwā' in the same year, 1922. There were other newspapers that survived the wave of oppression as they succumbed to the Italian authorities and became part of them, like al-<sup>C</sup>Adl, edited by Zākī Banūn, others were originally launched by the Italians to be their voice, like Barīd Barqa in Benghazi. They both continued publication until the end of the Italian rule, but with very little impact on the cultural or political life of the country. The only newspaper that gave some attention to cultural and literary matters was al-Raqīb al-<sup>C</sup>Atīd, edited by Maḥmūd Nadīm bin Mūsā. It was a resumption of a newspaper that had first come out under Turkish rule, and then when it was stopped as a result of the Italian invasion, the editor went to Turkey where he resumed publishing it again. He could only afford to publish a few issues. Encouraged by the peace treaty that was concluded between the Italians and the resistance movement, he came back to Tripoli to start his paper again, changing its name from al-Raqīb to al-Raqīb al-<sup>C</sup>Atīd as an indication of its long history, telling his readers in the first issue that:

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1. Aḥmad Rāsīm Qadrī, "al-Nahḍa al-Fikriyya fī Lībiyā", al-Afkār, March 1958, p.33.



"We have decided to resume the publication of our newspaper after it was incapacitated by a cloud that turned the brightness of day to darkness, and sent thunder storms that prevented it from publication."<sup>1</sup>

As in its first period of publication, it dedicated the back page to cultural and literary affairs. It was the only journal at the time to publish stories and articles related to language, poetry and arts. It was also a forum for Libyan writers, especially young talent. On the whole, al-Raqīb offered the only cultural outlet during the dark years of the twenties.

Political poetry attacking the colonial Italians was circulating secretly. The most rebellious poems were written by a young poet, just making his impact on the literary life of his country, who was to become in later years the poet of the nation: Ahmad Rafīq al-Mahdawī (1898-1961).<sup>2</sup> In 1920 he was just returning from eight years absence; since 1912 he had been living in Egypt with his family, who had fled the Italian invasion. Although still a boy

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1. Al-Raqīb al-<sup>C</sup>Atīd, (Tripoli), 6, Muharram, 1338 A.H., p.1.

2. His Diwan, Dīwān Shā<sup>C</sup>ir al-Waṭan al-Kabīr has been published in three parts, the first dealing with the poems of the period 1919-35 (Benghazi 1971), the second with the period 1935-46 (Benghazi 1962) and the third, 1946-61 (Benghazi N.D.). He has been the subject of two works: Khalīfa al-Tillīsī, Rafīq Shā<sup>C</sup>ir al-Waṭan (Tripoli 1965); <sup>C</sup>Abd Rabbih al-Ghannāy, Rafīq fī al-Mīzān (Benghazi 1968).



when the Italians advanced on Libya he had first hand experience of the sufferings and atrocities that accompanied that advance, as his family tried to reach the border to escape the Italian brutalities. His poetic talent nurtured by those events, and benefiting from a proper education in Egypt, Rafīq became the most qualified person to lend his voice to the plight of his people. His first target when he came back to Benghazi was a group calling itself "The Arab Constitutional Party" which was established by the Italians to exploit Arab sentiment and use it against the Turks who were giving the Libyan resistance some assistance at the time. They claimed that the Italians had come to Libya to liberate it from Turkish domination. Another institution that was installed by the Italians using native people was the newspaper Barīd Barqa. What irritated him most was to see Libyan nationals becoming tools in the hands of the colonial power, so they were to become the target for his anger and indignation - like the owner of this newspaper, who at that time was Muḥammad Tāhir al-Miḥayshī. These poems and others gained him the enmity of the Italian authorities, and as soon as the Fascists took over he left the country for Turkey, where he lived for nine years.

A contemporary of Rafīq's was Aḥmad al-Shārif (1872-1959), a poet of the same standing as Rafīq. He used to be called "The Shaykh of the Poets". Although his poetry was preoccupied with mysticism and piety, he was also moved by the events in his country.<sup>1</sup>

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1. His poems have been published by <sup>c</sup>Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrātī, Aḥmad al-Shārif: Dirāsa wa-Dīwān (Tripoli 1963).

Al-Shārif was very close to the Libyan resistance movement. He experienced prison at the hands of the Italians, although in later years his views towards them mellowed.

Another poet who played a major role in the cultural life of the time was Ahmad al-Faqīh Hasan, (1895-1976) who founded a literary club in 1920 and tried with some of his colleagues to enlighten the people of their country, through lectures.<sup>1</sup> They also gave evening classes for the benefit of those who could not attend the regular schools. The club was closed down when the Fascists took over, and al-Faqīh Hasan avoided public life until the Italians left the country, after which he contributed a great deal to post-war Libya.

Naturally enough the poets of that period concentrated on the message they meant to convey to the people more than on the way it was said. The cause was all-important to them. Artistic treatment and style were set aside or considered of secondary importance. Theirs was direct, militant poetry, whose effect subsided with the occasion that inspired it. But it was exactly this and nothing else that it sought. This poetry was intended for political agitation, arousing national fervour and alerting the people to the crimes committed by the colonialists.

Cultural relations with the outside world did not exist: the Italians blocked every contact Libya had with other Arab countries.

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1. His poems were published under the title Dīwān Ahmad al-Faqīh Hasan (Tripoli 1966).



It seems that before the Fascists took over, that censorship had been less rigorous and in 1920 al-Liwā' al-Tarābulusī had published the full text of a story by an Egyptian writer, Muṣṭafā al-Manfalūṭī in which the author attacked the idle and rich classes.<sup>1</sup> But as soon as the Fascists took over every contact with the outside world was severed, and while Graziani was erecting a wall alongside the border with Egypt to prevent any contact, his colleagues were busy erecting cultural and mental walls so that they could keep the people of the country cut off from the outside world.

The Italians tried to fill the vacuum by some translations from Italian literature and on 30th December 1928 the newspaper al-<sup>c</sup>Adl started serializing a translation of Dante's Divine Comedy.<sup>2</sup> At a later date it was published in book form - the only literary work to come out in book form under Italian rule!

The only other major cultural event that took place in the Twenties was the visit paid to Tripoli in 1927 by the most famous Arab drama group, Ramsīs, led by the doyen of Arab theatre, Yūsuf Wahbī, to perform some of their repertoire. Here is how Ahmad Rāsim describes this occasion:

"It appeared on the surface that nationalism was dead - people seemed to have stopped thinking about Arab history or Arab culture until the arrival of Yūsuf Wahbī's drama group in 1927, and the appearance on the walls of Tripoli's streets of posters

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1. Al-Liwā' al-Tarābulusī, 18, 25 November, 1920.

2. Serialised in al-<sup>c</sup>Adl from 3 December 1928 until 5 October 1929, it was translated by a Lebanese.



announcing the plays in a beautifully written Arabic hand, that inflamed the feelings and awakened the latent emotions. For people had almost forgotten there was in the world a living Arabic language, and there existed in the world, free Arab nations."<sup>1</sup>

The Thirties was a completely different decade, now that the country was firmly under Italian control. After the natural shock of the execution of <sup>C</sup>Umar al-Mukhtār which left the people in horror and dismay, life gradually started to acquire the monotony of humdrum existence. Aḥmad Qadrī, himself a writer of the Thirties, explained the feeling that prevailed at that time:

"Life was monotonous in every sense, a feeling of frustration and complete submission to fate and destiny. This belief in destiny, which the Italian writers consider a defect in Islam, was the only thing that made people survive at all, and live through the agony of seeing their freedom taken away from them while they were powerless to do anything about it."<sup>2</sup>

The major literary work that was widely read in the early years of the Thirties was a poem written by the doyen of Arab poets, Aḥmad Shawqī, lamenting the execution of <sup>C</sup>Umar al-Mukhtār, which was circulated secretly. "A reader read it with fear, yet with a great sense of ecstasy, happy at the feeling it evoked and the noble emotions it inspired."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Aḥmad Rāsim Qadrī, "al-Nahḍa al-Fikriyya fī Lībiyā", al-Afkār, March 1958, p.33.

2. Ibid., p.32.

3. Ibid., p.33.

The most important cultural event came with the publication of a monthly magazine called Lībiyā al-Musawwara, edited by <sup>c</sup>Umar Fakhri al-Mihayshi, which was to become a landmark in the development of modern Libyan literature. In spite of its publication under the auspices of the Fascist government, and its declared objective to serve the Italian interest, it nevertheless lent its pages generously to modern Libyan writings. It was an instrument in the hands of the Italians by which they could introduce to the reading public their achievements, but indirectly it was also an instrument in the hands of the Libyans which could serve as an outlet for their artistic activities. One year after its appearance the editor wrote in the editorial:

"We want to make this journal a platform for our writers and the product of their minds and imaginations, and a means of cultural communication between the sons of this country."<sup>1</sup>

He proved to be faithful to his promise, because during the six years of its existence it did just that. Writers from different parts of the country sent their contributions, newly introduced forms of literature like plays and short stories were given a fair share of the pages of the magazine, highly sophisticated prose pieces were given an equal treatment, as well as poems and articles written by Qunāba, al-Shārif, al-Mahdawī - all of whom were among its regular contributors.

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1. Lībiyā al-Musawwara (Benghazi) October 1936, p.1.

The phenomenon that accompanied the cultural activities in the mid-Thirties was the division that started coming to light in the culture of those who were taking part in these activities.

There were those who had received an Italian education, who although few in number, were nevertheless in the most favourable position to make their impact on the cultural establishment (if we may call it that) which was throughout those years the domain of graduates of Islamic schools. In a richer cultural environment, that would have been cause for a great conflict invoking controversy and argument. But in Libya of the Thirties there was little for the intelligentsia to quarrel about, as Ahmad Rāsim Qadrī points out:

"As the year 1935 arrived, there appeared on the scene in Libya a group of people who knew only Italian culture with very little knowledge of Arabic, alongside those who knew only Arabic culture with very little knowledge of Italian. To tell the truth, the country benefited a great deal from them."<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the obvious tension that would have been created in a country which had lived for centuries faithful to its Arabic-Islamic heritage, or indeed because of it and the threat it poses, a measure of adaptability seems to have been applied whereby both groups would benefit from each other. For example, Muḥammad al-Hanqārī, a Qādī in the Islamic court started writing the newly-introduced literary form, the play, which had been brought to his

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1. Ahmad Rāsim Qadrī, "al-Nahḍa al-Fikriyya fī Lībiyā" al-Afkār, March 1958, p.33.



attention by articles referring to Italian literature. He based his plays on the literary history of the Arabs. He began to serialise a play about the poet <sup>C</sup>Umar Ibn Abī Rabi<sup>C</sup>a in Lībiyā al Muṣwwara.<sup>1</sup> A prominent poet, Rafīq al-Mahdawī, with his Arabic schooling, became aware of Gabriele d'Annunzio and began to write about him. He was, of course, criticised for praising a poet who so eagerly encouraged the occupation of Libya. Aḥmad Rāsīm Qadrī, Wahbī al-Būrī and Muṣṭfā al-Sarrāj were regularly writing and translating articles and stories, using their Italian culture to introduce new forms of writing, opening up new horizons and breaking new ground. One of their services was, as Aḥmad Qadrī puts it,

"...the emergence of a new form of written Arabic similar to that achieved by the 'emigrant writers', which took the Arab world by storm, because it had been influenced by the best in Latin literature, filtered through an Arab mentality and perception."<sup>2</sup>

But that remained of very limited use, as there was no publishing industry to encourage people to write and improve on this newly acquired style. It was confined to the pages of a monthly magazine and it never had enough strength to carry it beyond the Italian period to influence the coming generation.

As regards political thought and expression, the country was kept under strict scrutiny: no voice was to be heard criticizing

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1. The serialisation began in October 1938.

2. Qadrī, Aḥmad Rāsīm, loc.cit.



or opposing the Italian occupation, during which time writers who were known for their patriotic feelings, like Qunāba and al-Shārif seemed to have lost heart, or indeed lost hope altogether, and tried to please the Italians by writing poems in their praise.<sup>1</sup> Rafīq al-Mahdawī did not compromise. He came back from Turkey in 1934 under the impression that a spirit of conciliation might have prevailed after the end of military operations. He started writing for Lībiyā al-Musawwara, and although the Italians did take some measures to win over the Libyans, al-Mahdawī was not impressed. On the contrary, he seems to have been disappointed by the oppression the Libyans lived under, and at the peak of the Italianization programme, whereby the Italians hoped to create a new generation of Libyans loyal to Italy,

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1. In conversation with the present writer, Ahmad Qunāba explained the conditions under which these poems were written. As there seemed to have been no chance of the country being liberated from Italian rule at that time, some patriotic writers like Qunāba and al-Shārif resigned themselves to working towards achieving better standards for their people by appealing to the Italian rulers for better treatment, explaining to their leaders the appalling conditions under which the Libyans lived - especially in a time when the Italians were trying to show some goodwill towards the native population.



al-Mahdawi wrote a long poem called Ghayth al Saghīr (Little Ghayth), wherein he exposed the fallacy and vanity of those efforts.

The public loved it and al-Afkār describes how it spread among the Libyan reading public

"like the spread of a solemnly kept secret newly divulged. There were many others, but this poem was to be passed from one to another, learnt by heart, and read in utmost secrecy."<sup>1</sup>

These were the only signs of life on the cultural scene during the Thirties. Apart from that, there were no other activities, to contribute to the literature of that era (apart from one book of Dante), a situation summed up by Ahmad Rāsim Qadrī:

"there was no book issued, and no scholar or writer or historian had a manuscript published. No single writer was able to give a lecture to a public meeting."<sup>2</sup>

Kāmil al-Maḡhūr, a prominent short story writer laments the isolation of the country from socialist ideas and modern philosophy, which were making their impact on the other nations of the modern world:

"The colonialists isolated Libya from the humanitarian cultures that were sweeping the world, and the new ideas and concepts that would demolish the forces of reaction and colonialism, which the fascist colonial rulers of Libya feared.

Libyan cultural history was completely cut off, and left isolated, drawing its concepts from old books where libraries were private property, beyond the reach of the

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1. See the unsigned article "Min Adab al-Sharq", al-Afkār, Tripoli, February 1957.

2. Ahmad Rāsim Qadrī "al-Nahḍa al-Fikriyya fī Lībiyā", al-Afkār March 1958, p.33.



masses. This culture of yellowing books became the monopoly of a certain group of people, who used it to serve their interests and sometimes the interests of other parties. The people were not among them."<sup>1</sup>

However, these masses he was referring to, even if they had been allowed access to those libraries, would not have been able to make use of them, for they were illiterate. The only option left for them was to fall back on their traditions, living on ideas acquired during Turkish rule, and holding grimly to them, lest, should they let go, they might fall victim to the colonialists' declared schemes to take away their faith, their identity and their Arabic-Islamic personality. These were the only ideas they could identify with and take refuge in, and use in their defence against the invading culture, as long as the threat was there. The threat lasted thirty-two years. During that time Libyan society was completely wrapped up in its old traditions, unable to escape the cultural stagnation of the Italian era. Only after Italian rule came to an end was society in Libya exposed to the new ideas and concepts that Arabic-Islamic culture had experienced from as long ago as the beginning of the century. Libya had been asleep for thirty years.

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1. See introduction by Kāmil al-Maqhūr to al-Hanīn al-Zāmi' by <sup>c</sup>Alī al-Ruqay<sup>c</sup>ī, 2nd edition (Tripoli 1979), p.20.

## Chapter Two

### THE STRUCTURE OF THE SHORT STORY

Before beginning to discuss the Libyan short story, it is perhaps appropriate to devote a few pages to shedding some light on the criteria that constitute the short story as a literary genre. This discussion will restrict itself to an exploration of the elements that render from a short passage of fiction a short story proper. While we have sufficient knowledge of what is not a short story proper we still do not have an ideal definition, simply because

"The history of the short story embraces diverse tendencies some of which have stretched, shrunk or otherwise altered previous conceptions of the nature of the genre."<sup>1</sup>

or as H.E. Bates puts it "The reason why the short story has never been adequately defined"<sup>2</sup> lies in what he calls its "infinite flexibility".<sup>3</sup> Thus one of its inherent problems is that, as one of the youngest literary genres, it has not yet settled into a fixed pattern.

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1. Ian Reid, The Short Story, (London 1977), p.3.

2. H.E. Bates, The Modern Short Story, (London 1941), p.16.

3. Loc.cit.



We can, however, start by stating the obvious, hoping it will lead us to some definite conclusions. A short story must, in order to justify its name, tell a story and tell it briefly. As for the manner in which this brief story is told, this is a point on which schools of short story-writing differ and diversify; nevertheless, one's task is to identify the most basic and essential elements which the short story should contain. These essentials are as follows:

1. The short story proper is evidently not any of the pre-modern forms of short fiction; it is not a fable, a legend or a myth, it is not a tale, a folktale, or an allegory, it is also not an anecdote, a sketch or a pen-portrait, as they are defined in books of literary terms. Yet it could constitute elements of all these or some of them, and indeed its origin lies in these earlier forms. But other ingredients must be added to qualify it as a short story proper. Early efforts did try to combine elements of the tale with elements of the sketch in their quest for the artistic short story. The modern short story, therefore, is a development of older forms.

2. The totality of effect which a short story must have, has been since its early stages an essential element of its criteria. One of the earliest theoreticians of short story writing was Edgar Allan Poe. Reviewing Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales in May 1842, he notices how the writer

"having conceived with deliberate care a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect is not to the one pre-established design."<sup>1</sup>

The point Edgar Allan Poe made in a moment of perception and insight, is undoubtedly still valid today in spite of the different approaches and techniques and the various stages of development the short story has gone through since then.

3. Economy, therefore, is the key word in creating such a powerful final and single effect, an economy by which we mean that every word contributes towards bringing this result. And that is where the short story differs and distinguishes itself from the long narrative. It calls for greater discipline and organisation than the novel does, it requires greater restraint, control and intensity. "There is no room in the short story for an irrelevant detail."<sup>2</sup> It demands an ultimate care and discipline,

"for any shift in its design or even variation in style would alter the total response to it".<sup>3</sup>

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1. See Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe Vol.2, Tales and Sketches 1831-1842, edited by Thomas Mubbott, (Camb. Mass 1978) pp.xviii-xix.
  2. Jack Carpenter and Peter Neumeyer, Elements of Fiction, (Dubuque, Iowa 1974), p.20.
  3. Cleanth Brook and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Fiction, (New York 1943), p.570.

4. The Aristotelian concept in which a story follows the sequences of beginning, middle and end which was the guiding light for creative writers for centuries was modified by modern story writers to suit a more advanced technique. A modern theoretician and short story-writer, Frank O'Connor put forward three elements which should be found in a short story, in this order: exposition, development and drama.<sup>1</sup> He also makes a point of how the short story is the art of a 'submerged population', it is at its best when expressing loneliness, protest, and discontent, considering it a form by which the oppressed addresses the world. He draws on the heritage of the short story writer throughout the years.

"The submerged population changes its character from writer to writer from generation to generation. It may be Gogol's officials, Turgenev's serfs, Maupassant's prostitutes, Chekhov's doctors and teachers, Sherwood Anderson's provincials, always dreaming of escape."<sup>2</sup>

Here is another feature in which the short story, as he sees it, differs from the novel: while the short story represents an attitude of mind that attracts groups of submerged population the novel can still accept the concept of a man well integrated into the larger community.<sup>3</sup> That is not to say that the short story is merely an art for the misfit and the outcast, it is <sup>however</sup> ~~simply~~ a form

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1. Frank O'Connor, The Lonely Voice, (London 1963), p.26.

2. Ibid., p.18.

3. Ibid., p.18.



which lends itself to expressing alienation, loneliness and protest, and that is what makes it a favourite form of expression used by the underground press of the student protest movements in the 1960s. However though it is an art of protest, it needs a margin of freedom where protest is not totally suppressed either by political censorship or social taboos or religious rigidity.

5. Another development in its form came with writers like Jorge Luis Borge when the frontiers of reality expanded beyond the norms of everyday life, Borge made it legitimate territory for the short story-writer to penetrate. He tried to answer the question "what faces all writers of fiction all the time: how to postulate a reality richer and more extensive than they have powers to tell."<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, he sets to provide by the short story a world in which he can explore human complexities, a technique he applies successfully in his well-celebrated book, Ficciones.<sup>2</sup>

6. A short story can only hold by the implications it carries. Walter Allen considers these implications to be "the hall-mark" of the modern short story. Where a single incident is utterly transformed and "dissolved in a multitude of implications"<sup>3</sup> the

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1. John Starrack, Paper Tigers: the Ideal Fiction of Jorge Luis Borge (Oxford 1977), p.108.

2. Jorge Luis Borge, Ficciones, Translated by Anthony Kerrigam and others, (New York 1962).

3. Walter Allen, The Short Story in English, (Oxford 1981), p.7.

incident itself is not very significant; the significance derives from succeeding in transforming it into something beyond the event itself, something which is indirectly tied to its theme.

7. Authenticity and artistic honesty are merits demanded by every form of art and literature, and this is even more so in the case of the short story. Given the limited time and space it cannot afford artifice, pretension, or falsification, it has to be true, sincere, and honest, without confusing sincerity with a too accurate copying or description of what happens in actual life because its art "is not a trick, it is an encounter between two people - the passage of truth from one mind to another"<sup>1</sup> and that is how a short story "may take only a few minutes to write"<sup>2</sup> yet "in those few minutes it may enter into the reader's mind in a way which will never be forgotten"<sup>3 and</sup> that cannot be achieved by cheating the reader. The truth of fiction, in the opinion of the authors of Understanding Fiction consists of "matters such as the following 1) the consistency and comprehensibility of character 2) the motivation and credibility of action and 3) the acceptability of the total meaning."<sup>4</sup>

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1. T.O. Beachcroft, The Modest Art: Survey of the Short Story in English, (Oxford, London 1969), p.10.

2. Loc.cit.

3. Loc.cit.

4. Cleanth Brook and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Fiction, p.27.

There is no room in the discussion for the technicalities of the artistic short story. Technicalities such as how the plot is laid, or the way a character should be created ~~and~~<sup>and</sup> brought to life, or how a situation should be conceived and developed, or other details like how a short story should have an impressive start or how it may obtain an effective ending, nor will we discuss technical questions such as how the setting could influence the overall effect of the story or to what extent a dialogue should be used to contribute to the construction of a successful short story, or what length a short story should have. These technicalities demand a greater treatment than can be adequately afforded in these introductory pages. However it is appropriate to include some personal observations regarding a few points that are essential to its technique:

(1) A key moment seems to be an essential part of a successful short story. Without it "the structure of the short story will be loose and vague".<sup>1</sup> Although there are stories which try to cover a long span of time, ~~the~~ the result is not always satisfactory. It must be as Walter Allen puts it "the fruit of a single moment of time, of a single incident, a single perception".<sup>2</sup>

(2) A short story has no reason not to strive to capture the essence of life itself, and although it is a moment of given time,

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1. Ibid., p.577.

2. Walter Allen, The Short Story in English, p.7.



at a given place, it should nevertheless be presented as specimen of human existence. Although it has a certain princip<sup>a</sup>l character, depicted at a certain stage in his life, he should be introduced as a representative of the human race. It is as in the vision of Chekhov time and space "bridged in one instant" evoking "the oneness of the world".<sup>1</sup>

(3) Another essential ingredient is conflict; "all fiction involves at one level or another conflict".<sup>2</sup> Though it should not be confused with physical conflict like enmities between people; what matters here is the inner conflict, that of ideas, emotions, and the undercurrent of conflict. Some critics consider that it is essential only as far as the plot is concerned: "conflict is what the plot revolves around".<sup>3</sup> This may be so, but there is good reason for considering it more essential to the "unplotted" story, for conflict remains the source of life to it.

(4) There is an air of urgency about the short story, like a vital message that needs to be delivered quickly and briefly, as if one is trying to avert a disaster; any elaboration or hesitation or deviation or delay could tarnish the finished product.

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1. Donald Reyfield, Chekhov, The Evolution of His Art (London 1975), p.153.

2. Brook and Warren, Understanding Fiction, p.602.

3. Carpenter and Neumeyer, Elements of Fiction, p.62.

This has been called the element of immediacy,<sup>1</sup> and this element makes timing in the short story a vital factor to its creation.

(5) External action is no longer the dominant mode of the modern short story, due to the spread of the cinema and television.

Action has given way to the inner feeling because the written word cannot compete in visualizing the action. Therefore suspenseful action seems to have been discarded around the 1950s and much of what happens now takes place in the character's mind.

(6) The short story should not try to imitate the poem, because it is not poetry. What is demanded of it is different from what is demanded of the poem, yet a poetic style seems essential to enable the writer of this genre to condense and concentrate, and makes it necessary for achieving a succinct and compact treatment.

Walter Allen seems to have arrived at a similar conclusion "I seem to be trembling on the verge of saying that the modern short story writer is a lyric poet in prose".<sup>2</sup> Walter Allen's hesitation is perhaps unnecessary as his judgement would seem to be justified.

In concluding these observations it should be emphasised that whatever the criteria of a short story are, whatever rules theoreticians and scholars of this genre may have assembled, it remains the craftsmanship of the short story writer, his talent,

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1. Frank O'Connor, The Lonely Voice, p.216.

2. Walter Allen, The Short Story in English, p.8.

his vision, his imagination which play the major role in making out of these elements a piece of art. No set of rules could guarantee the production of a good short story. A writer "has to have something intangible which enables him to create a story, something in which other people with the same training are lacking".<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, up to the writer himself to apply and implement these rules, weave them to the extent that when we read the accomplished work we are not made aware of what goes into it and what does not, because all have been absorbed and dissolved in that piece of prose which we call the short story.

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1. D.G. Stephens, Aspects of The Growth and Practice of the English Short Story. Unpublished thesis presented for the degree of Ph.D. Department of English, University of Edinburgh 1958, p.221.



## Chapter Three

### THE BEGINNINGS OF THE LIBYAN SHORT STORY

The tradition that caters for the short fictional work in Libya, among both the nomadic and the settled peoples of the area, goes back at least as far as the Hellenic period, and probably much further. A collection of Libyan tales was made before the time of Aeschylus (456 B.C.) who borrowed from the collection in his own works.<sup>1</sup> These Libyan tales have, for

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1. He referred to the Libyan tales in a poem called

"The Wounded Eagle":

"This the story told in Libyan tales:

An eagle, struck with an arrow from a bow

said when he saw the crafty winged thing,

'so not by others but by our own plumes

we're taken?'"

see "The Wounded Eagle" by Aeschylus, The Oxford Book of Greek Verse in Translation, edited by T.F. Higham, and C.H. Bowra, (London 1938), p.286, verse 260.

the greater part, disappeared, only surviving in the collections of classical Greek authors.<sup>1</sup>

This tradition of the short fiction as the main focus of the traditional story-tellers, has tempted some critics to state that the modern Libyan short story stems directly from the folk-tale,<sup>2</sup>

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1. One of these Libyan tales was included in the Discourses of Dio Chrysostom (c.40-115 A.D.) under the title "Libyan Myth" (which has been ascribed to a certain Cybissus, a Libyan) depicting the doings of a female monster who lived in the desert near the Gulf of Sirtica. See Dio Chrysostom, Discourses, Vol.I, The Fifth Discourse, translated by J.W. Cohoon (London N.D.), P.25.

Another surviving story is recorded by Lucian under the title "Dipsads" describing the life of the Garamantes in the south of Libya. The Dipsad is a small snake; "its victims suffer agonies of thirst, and strangest of all, the more they drink the greater is their craving for water", see Lucian VI, translated by K. Kilburn, (London 1959), p.75.

2. See the introduction by Kāmil al-Maḡhūr to Ahmad I. al-Faqīh's al-Bahr Lā Mā'Fīh, (Tripoli 1966). See also A.M. 'Atiyya, Fī al-Adab al-lībī al Hadīth, (Tripoli 1973), p.59.



an opinion which shows the importance attributed to short fiction in Libyan life. However on closer inspection, it would seem that this theory does not accord with the evidence at hand and that there is little to suggest a continual development of the short story except in some cases where writers try to borrow the folk-tale formula and apply it in modern stories. Apart from this exception, the Libyan short story, from its embryonic stage, was influenced by the pioneering writers of this genre in other Arab countries, especially Egypt. This stage goes back only as far as 1908 when the restoration of the Ottoman Constitution made it possible for the country to establish independent journals. Since then newspapers began publishing essays written in the form of short stories. An example of this is a short piece of satire called "Laylat Uns"<sup>1</sup> (A Night of Joy) published in al-Mirsād. The author's name is not given, but it is written in the style of Shaykh Maḥmūd Nadīm Bin Mūsā who was one of the editors of the newspaper at that time. It was intended as an exposé of some of the notables of the city who lead a double life, pretending piety and righteousness in the daylight but, come dusk, revelling in the company of the bottle and the ladies of the night. The story is told in the first person. As the author is passing through one of the back streets at night he suddenly hears people singing and

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1. See Laylat Uns in al-Mirsād (Tripoli) 26 Muḥarram, 1329 A.H.  
p.3.

playing music; following his journalistic curiosity, he tries to find out what this occasion could be, and in this way he enters upon a house of vice. The writer uses this device to criticise these negative aspects of social life. It is quite obvious that the writer is unaware that he was employing the technique of the short story, nor did he intend to write one. In pursuing his journalistic profession he had naturally adopted certain elements of the short story. This journalistic exposé depicts the atmosphere inside the house, describing how a night of joy ends in a scandal when a row starts. The debauchees awaken the neighbours, who are asked to remain silent by one of these hypocritical notables who pleaded for discretion. He was not aware that al-Mirsād was present at the time:

"documenting the actual event, supporting what it says with clear-cut proof, and shining evidence, exposing the lechers and uncovering the hypocrites."<sup>1</sup>

Another piece of prose which was very close to the artistic short story was also published in al-Mirsād. It was a powerful short narrative entitled "Law Kāna al-Faqr Rajulan La-Qataluh"<sup>2</sup> (If poverty were a man I would have killed him). It was published on the first page and was written in a very emotional style intended to arouse the passion of the reader for the poverty that prevailed

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1. Loc.cit.

2. See "Law Kāna al-Faqr Rajulan La-Qataluh", al-Mirsād

16 Rabi<sup>c</sup> II, 1329 A.H., p.1.



in the country at the time. It takes the cause of the lower strata of society and identifies with them. It begins:

"My earthly desires commanded me to buy some mutton. I had already bought some bread earlier. After cooking the meat, I was about to satisfy my hunger and was on the point of eating when I heard the cry of a young girl, a cry that set my teeth on edge, raised a tremble in my hand, brought a sense of revulsion in my stomach for the food I had just prepared. I was convinced, there and then, that I should give the crying girl a portion of this food as zakāt (alms) so I took a part of it and opened my door; there confronted me a scene which would make the very walls weep: a girl in the flower of her youth leading an old man and two small boys, clad in ragged clothes that could barely cover their bodies which were weak and frail, the skin stretched over their bones, so thin that one would imagine that a gust of wind could blow them about like leaves on a tree. My hand refrained from giving of the food I was holding, for with it I could hardly begin to satisfy the smallest part of their hunger. With a heavy heart I went back and brought all the food I had, happy to give it to this family which represented for me all the members of our community, indeed more than that, of the human race. Then, as a man without recourse, I began to reproach the heavens as though they had turned to stone, as though the elements, of righteousness and the people of virtue have abandoned this country."<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to express his anger at the fate of this family, and how he felt unable to remain where he was. The writer recalls feeling a great desire to run away, seeking some comfort in the plains outside

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1. Loc.cit.



the city, but no sooner is he at the gates of the city than he finds crowds of derelict people dying of starvation. He is told their story by one who comes from an area which was hit by drought which destroyed their live-stock. But the pride of this wretched man and his loyalty to his country prevented him from selling his land to a bank he suspected of buying up land for the benefit of a foreign country, for the Ottoman Bank would offer no help. Like the others, this man was almost a skeleton on the point of death. The writer leaves this place of agony and suffering and goes into the fields, seeking some consolation, but instead, his grief increases at the sight of human beings having to live in dwellings that are not fit for animals, where dozens of people are crowded into huts. He feels sick at what he sees, and decides to return home quickly. When he arrives the postman comes with a letter intended for his newspaper, in which is described the sorry state of a poverty-stricken area in the countryside. The contents of the letter only adds to his agony and sadness and he feels there is nothing he can do but to scream in the face of his fellow countrymen to move them to do something to rescue these wretched people.

"Law Kāna al-Faqr" bears no author's name, but there are indications suggesting who the author was. As the narrator is a newspaper editor, to whom a letter is sent, in the story, intended for the correspondence page, we may presume that the author himself is an editor and moreover that he well may have been the owner of Al-Mirṣād, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Fissāṭuwī. Shaykh Bin Mūsā had left

the paper a few months earlier to establish his own newspaper. Since then, there is no mention of any other person assisting al-Fissātuwī to write the newspaper, and as the unusually modern style in which this piece was written is compatible with that of al-Fissātuwī, we may assume that he indeed is the writer. Furthermore, the story appears on the first page, a place which is usually reserved for the editorial comments of the chief editor and the owner.

In this piece of prose we can easily detect the influence of Muṣṭafā al-Manfalūtī.<sup>1</sup> The piece was written not only in his style, but also in the spirit in which he writes, even adopting one of the themes that dominate al-Manfalūtī's writings. Al-Manfalūtī established himself at that period as the most popular writer of fiction, for his romanticism, idealism and concern for the oppressed people, as well as for his passionate and emotional style. A year

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1. Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūtī (1876-1924). An Egyptian writer, essayist and one of the pioneering writers of the Egyptian short story in its early stages. His written and translated stories were included in two books al-Nazarāt (Cairo 1910) and al-<sup>c</sup>Abarāt (Cairo 1915). See S.H. al-Nassāj, Tatawwur Fann al-Qissa al-Qasīra fī Misr (Cairo 1969), p.74. See also Abdel-Azīz Abdel-Meguid, The Modern Arabic Short Story (Cairo N.D. (1954?)), p.95.



earlier, in 1910, he had published his book, al-Nazarāt, which al-Fissātuwī could have read. Less than two years earlier al-Fissātuwī himself was in Cairo studying at al-Azhar, and was part of the literary scene, and had even published some articles there in a newspaper issued by his countryman, Sulaymān al-Bārūnī, called al-Asad al-Islāmī. There he would certainly have had access to the writings of the Egyptian writers, which makes their influence all the more natural. At that time the Arabic short story had not yet established itself and al-Manfalūtī's stories are considered to represent the stage that preceded the emergence of the short story proper in Arabic.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the situation in other Arab countries, the progress and development of various aspects of cultural life in Libya was interrupted by the war which broke out following the Italian invasion of 1911. As journals ceased to exist the country was, at a stroke, denied any further opportunity to develop this form of literature. Even when independent journals like al-Liwā' al-Tarābulusī and al-Waqt, appeared again in 1919, they were very much preoccupied with the

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1. S.H. al-Nassāj, Tatawwur Fann al-Qissa al-Qasīra fī Misr p.74. Historians of the short story consider stories such as "Sanatuhā al-Jadīda" by Mikha'īl Na<sup>c</sup>īma published in 1914, and "Fī al-Qitār" published in 1917 by Muḥammad Taymūr to be the beginnings of the short story proper in modern Arabic literature. See Abdel-Aziz Abdel-Meguid, The Modern Arabic Short Story, p.103.



national cause and every effort was directed towards that aim. Writers therefore resorted to traditional literary forms, like poetry, to prepare their people for the battle. Al-Liwā', however, did manage once to serialise a story by Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī called "al-Nāshi' al-Faqīr" (The Poor Infant), indicating that the style and themes of al-Manfalūṭī still held the attention of the Libyan reader. In this story al-Manfalūṭī pursued his recurring theme, defence of the poor and censure of the idle classes, explaining the honour and dignity of manual work and concluding with a moral comment

"It is happiness enough for you in this world, to have a clear conscience, a contented soul, and an honest heart, and to work by your hand so as to see by your eyes the fruit of your toil."<sup>1</sup>

The influence of al-Manfalūṭī remained in evidence even in the late Twenties when al-Raqīb al-<sup>c</sup>Atīd, under the editorship of Shaykh Maḥmūd Nadīm Bin Mūsā, started publishing some short stories. They followed, more or less, the same line as the journalistic story that ends with a moral comment; they are in other words, essays in the form of short stories. They were all unsigned. "Shay' min lā Shay'"<sup>2</sup> (Something out of Nothing) was a story about

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1. Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī, al-Nāshi' al-Faqīr, al-Liwā' al-Tarābulisī (Tripoli) 25 November 1920.

2. "Shay' min lā Shay'" al-Raqīb al-<sup>c</sup>Atīd (Tripoli) 22 December 1928.

betrayal, the story of an adopted orphan who becomes the instrument of misery to his foster parents. The writer uses some verses of poetry to emphasise his point. Another story, which was serialised in al-Raqīb al-<sup>C</sup>Atīd, called "al-Mujrim al-Danī'"<sup>1</sup> (The Low Criminal) presents the same theme. The husband leaves his sick wife unattended with her two children, and runs after another woman.

On 5 December 1929 we find another short piece of prose entitled "Anti"<sup>2</sup> (You) signed by a certain <sup>C</sup>Alī, who could be identified with <sup>C</sup>Alī, the son of the owner of al-Raqīb al-<sup>C</sup>Atīd, who at that time was helping his father with the editing. In "Anti" the writer is addressing a beautiful woman whom he loves and who has died at a tender age. He recalls their moments together under the jasmine and the apple tree, pledging that he would keep faithful to her for the rest of his days. Another newspaper, al-<sup>C</sup>Adl, edited by Muḥammad Zakī Bānūn published parts of Dante's Divine Comedy translated by <sup>C</sup>Abbūd Abū Rāshid, a Lebanese translator who lived in Libya and worked for the Italian administration. al-<sup>C</sup>Adl continued serialising the Divine Comedy for almost one year.<sup>3</sup> But the translation seems to have left no obvious influence which may be

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1. "al-Mujrim al-Danī'" al-Raqīb al-<sup>C</sup>Atīd (Tripoli) 20 December 1929.
  2. <sup>C</sup>Alī, "Anti", al-Raqīb al-<sup>C</sup>Atīd, 5 December 1929.
  3. Al<sup>C</sup>Adl began serialising it on 3 December 1928 and ended on 9 October 1929.

detected in stories published at that period. However, al-Raqīb al-<sup>c</sup>Atīd continued to publish the same type of stories when it entered the Thirties, and towards the middle of the decade it was publishing a more developed short story, an appropriate example of which is an anonymous story entitled "Hayāt Adīb"<sup>1</sup> (The Life of an Author). In it is described a moment in the life of an impoverished writer who was caught in a dilemma as to whether to spend the few pennies left to him on buying some food or on buying a copy of a journal, in which was published one of his stories.

The same year, 1935, witnessed the publication of a new magazine, Lībiyā al-Musawwara, marking the appearance of the short story proper in Libyan literature. The first issue came out in October 1935 and a story of the month was a regular feature which continued until the magazine ceased publication after the outbreak of the Second World War. The appearance of this magazine seems to have coincided with the prevalence of a new mood in the cultural life of the country, a new consciousness looking for an expression, and a new artistic sensibility that was seeking an outlet, which resulted in the emergence of the artistic short story. Among the factors that contributed to its emergence are the following:

1. By the early thirties the War of Liberation against the Italians had come to an unsuccessful conclusion after the martyrdom of the

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1. "Hayāt Adīb", al-Raqīb al-<sup>c</sup>Atīd, 9 April 1935.



leader of the Libyan resistance, Shaykh <sup>U</sup>Umar al-Mukhtār. Libyans then became resigned to accepting the facts of colonial life and the country had begun to assume aspects of normality.

2. A small group of educated men who had been brought up through the Italian schools were then emerging and they now began to make their impact on cultural life, searching for means of expression and finding in the short story a new and fresh format.

3. As direct political writings were suppressed under Fascist rule, the short story provided a subtler format by which writers and intellectuals could express their feelings without arousing the hostility of a fierce and authoritarian government.

4. As life returned to normality, the commercial class in the cities sought some form of leisure reading, a demand which was better served by stories than by poetry, although poetry remained the major literary mode of the cultural establishment.

5. Finally, there came the publication of the monthly cultural magazine, Lībiyā al-Muṣawwara which provided a very much needed instrument for the new generation of writers who felt inclined to imitate the cultural life of other Arab countries, and to resume what the older generation had tentatively started three decades previously.

In the first issue of Lībiyā al-Muṣawwara we read a short story signed with the initial "R", the author being Rāsim Fikrī,

the pen name of Ahmad Rāsim Qadrī.<sup>1</sup> The story, entitled "Quwwatān"<sup>2</sup> (Two Forces), is of little artistic merit, yet contains a vital element of the short story, namely conflict, its theme, as the title suggests, being a battle waged between two forces, in this case Good and Evil, in the depths of the human soul.

The writer tells a story of a friend brought up in a puritanical environment where his parents insist on teaching ideals and qualities not readily found in the real world. As an adult he is betrayed by

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1. Ahmad Rāsim Qadrī, born in Tripoli a few years before the Italian occupation, died in his home city of Tripoli in 1982. His father was a lawyer and journalist who had edited Ta<sup>c</sup>mīm-i Hurriyya, a Turkish magazine in Tripoli. He studied for a few years in Aleppo, Syria, after his family fled the Italian invasion, but soon returned to join the school that belonged to the bureau of the National Reform Party. He also studied Italian and wrote a few articles in it. In the Fifties and Sixties he edited al-Afkār, a literary magazine issued by the Society of Libyan-Turkish Friendship.
  2. In an article published in the Egyptian magazine al-Majalla (Cairo, January 1971), pp.2-13. Dr <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Qādir al-Qutṭ attributed this story to Wahbi al-Būrī, on the presumption that al-Būrī was the writer of all the stories in Lībiyā al-Muṣawwara. Qadrī, in an interview with Fawziyya Baryūn acknowledges the authorship of the story.

the woman he loves, and the bitter disappointment causes a fundamental change in his character and henceforth he sees only the dark side of life. Love, betrayal, and destiny form the triangle around which the story evolves. These three motifs are the themes of most of his stories and essays. His style is lucid and easy and not overladen with those figures of speech which are the stock-in-trade of the older literary modes. Rather, he employs an elegant journalistic style, only marred by a tedious predilection to suspend the narrative in order to insert moralising asides which detract from the story without enhancing the morality of the message he is communicating.

Two issues later, in December 1935, we read another of his love stories "Hal Anta Yā Ramadān?"<sup>1</sup> (Is that You Ramadān?) signed under another pseudonym, Qāsim Fikrī.<sup>2</sup> It is a story about the loss of

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1. Qāsim Fikrī, "Hal Anta Yā Ramadān" in Lībiyā al-Musawwara December 1933, p.29.

2. In an interview with Fawziyya Baryūn, he said that he made the name out of two Egyptian writers he had admired in his youth; the first is Qāsim Amīn, famous for his writings about female emancipation, and Fikrī Abāza, a famous Egyptian journalist. This demonstrates that the pioneering writers of the Libyan short story, in spite of their Italian education, took their inspiration from contemporary Arab writing. See Fawziyya Baryūn, Al-Qissa al-Qasira fi Lībiyā, unpublished thesis for M.A. Degree (Cairo University, Faculty of Arts, 1974).



loved ones. The writer is addressing Ramadān, the month of fasting, during which he has lost the woman he loved and also, a brother who had died in a far-away land. The first part of the story is about the death scene of the woman he loves who had confided to her governess in attendance that she loved the writer. The writer had wanted to marry her but her family had refused on account of his poor background.

The story was written in an autobiographical style as if recounting an episode of his life. This attempt is not as well-constructed as his first story, as he seems to have lost control of the plot by encompassing what are essentially two separate stories. His style shows no direct influence of any particular story writer; nevertheless, his journalistic treatment, and his admiration for essay writers, like Fikrī Abāza and Qāsim Amīn in Egypt, are evident. Evident also is the echo of his having read widely in Italian, and in his story we can trace some of this influence when we see him using phrases such as "Ṣalli min ajlī ya Dāda'i" (Pray for me Nanny) expressions which are alien to Arabic colloquial speech and so obviously borrowed from a foreign culture. In the fourth issue of the magazine he published another story entitled "Ṣaḥā'if al-Shabāb"<sup>1</sup> (Pages of Youth). The theme of the story is love and betrayal, and he attempts to analyse the feelings of a jealous lover who is hurt

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1. Qāsim Fikrī, "Ṣaḥā'if al-Shabāb", Lībiyā al-Musawwara, January 1936, p.29.

by the betrayal of the woman he loves, and starts entertaining thoughts of killing her. As she already lives under the threat of death from her former husband, the lover would probably not be the prime suspect, as it would be the husband who would be accused. These thoughts, however, come to an abrupt end when he hears the voice of the muezzin coming from a nearby mosque. He abandons his thoughts, and is struck by remorse.

"Ghurūb Sālīshī"<sup>1</sup> (The Sunset at Sālīshī), another story of love by this author, is written in a more poetic and mature style. He describes his feelings while watching the sunset in an Italian resort in the company of an Italian lady. The story ends when he parts company with her. Although it is obvious that he did not think of it as a story, for it was presented as an essay rather than as one of the series, "Short Story of the Month", it is more compact than any of his other stories. Ahmad Rāsim Qadrī did not possess the talent for short story writing; nevertheless his imagery, his easy and lucid style, and the fact that he was one of the first Libyans to attempt writing in this genre gives him a position of importance as one of the pioneering writers in this field.

The most prominent short story writers of the Thirties is undoubtedly Wahbī al-Būrī.<sup>2</sup> He also joined Lībiyā al-Musawwara in

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1. Rāsim Fikrī, "Ghurūb Sālīshī" in Lībiyā al-Musawwara, September 1936, p.13.

2. Wahbī al-Būrī, born in Derna around 1910, is a prominent Libyan writer and politician. Since the end of the British mandate, he served as Ambassador to the United Nations and as a foreign minister. He obtained his Ph.D. degree from Rome in Italian Literature.



its first year and became one of its main contributors throughout its existence, both translating from Italian and writing original articles about classical Italian literature. He published more than ten short stories in the magazine and translated many more. He believed, as he declares in an editorial in Lībiyā al-Musawwara in the

"attractive and beautiful stories which carry off the reader's imagination to a world of lovely dreams, [the reader] being told of the sweetness of love, of nature, and its beauty, of society and its vileness, of the world and its wonders."

In this article he was questioning the value which people in the West gave to what he termed "yellow literature" (from Italian, gialli), that is to say, crime and horror stories and the like. He wondered how a reader could buy a book advertised as "the book to give you sleepless nights".<sup>1</sup> But when he himself started to write short stories it was not in fact about lovely dreams or the sweetness of love, rather it was a bleak picture of frustrated love. The story is called "Laylat al-Zafāf"<sup>2</sup> (The Wedding Night), and tells the story of Khalīl who works as a driver. He is hired to drive a bride to her new home in another town, when suddenly he discovers that the woman he is driving is the girl he has loved since childhood, and whom he dreams of marrying as soon as he has saved up enough money for her

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1. Wahbī al-Būrī, "al-Adab al-Asfar", Lībiyā al-Musawwara, June 1937, p.2.

2. Al-Būrī, "Laylat al-Zafāf" Lībiyā al-Musawwara, September 1936, p.30.



dowry and the wedding expenses. He looks back at her and she catches his eyes in the mirror:

"His eyes were an expression of his thoughts, she understands that he is reproaching her, reminding her of the pledge she had made him. He understands from her looks that she is very regretful, indicating her helplessness against the tyranny of her father."<sup>1</sup>

The story develops, the plot slowly unfolds, and emotions are revealed in their intensity and rage:

"Now that she has married... what joy is left to him in life, which would now consist of the tedium of waiting late into the night outside taverns and night clubs waiting for whatever customers he could find. Life appeared grim and difficult to sustain, and devoid of any goodness. He looked again at the mirror and gazed into the eyes of Zaynab who seemed as if to understand what was going through his mind. He read in her eyes her genuine love for him, the powerful and true love that was rooted in her heart since childhood. Had she ever forgotten him? Not in the least, for now she is weeping, she is unhappy and so is he, perhaps more than her. The future holds more suffering and unhappiness. She is now with him, her life is in his hands. A terrible thought takes control of his mind, his eyes light up with a sinister gleam, so cruel that Zaynab, the moment she caught it, screamed in terror."<sup>2</sup>

The story ends as Khalīl drives the car over a cliff killing himself, Zaynab and the other woman in the car.

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1. Ibid., p.21.

2. Ibid., p.32.

This story is much more organised and well-constructed than any other published previously. To create the desired effect he contrasts the atmosphere of the wedding, its gait and cheerfulness, with the thoughts of the unhappy driver and the misery of the bride, leading to the tragedy at the end of the story. In doing so he touches on some of the social problems current in the practice of arranging marriages against the will of the bride. This short story may be considered as the first to appear in a Libyan journal which complies with the criteria of this literary genre.

In his second story al-Būrī attempts to deal with a problem of a universal nature: that of the stepmother. "Zawjat al-Ab"<sup>1</sup> (The Stepmother) is a story where fate plays, as indeed in most of these early stories, the major role in determining life's events. Instead of the writer being in control of the fate of his characters, it is fate which maintains control. The story starts when misfortune strikes a happy family taking away the mother and leaving two children and their father grief-stricken.

The children's despair is exacerbated when their father marries another woman who begins to change everything in the house to suit her own taste, showing little regard for the memory of their dead mother, and, using her influence over her husband, begins to alienate his children from him. Not only have they lost their mother, but now

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1. Al-Būrī, "Zawjat al-Ab", Lībiyā al-Musawwara, November 1936, p.30.

they are beginning to lose their father, there being no one in the house to protect them from the abuses and the ill-treatment of their stepmother. In a moment of despair the children decide to run away. Nature contributes to the scene of their departure:

"On a dark and rainy night, the cold penetrating, the rain torrential and the thunder deafening, the two children ran in their soaking clothes which stuck to their bodies, their teeth chattering from cold, sometimes falling in the mud, sometimes sinking in the deep puddles formed by the torrent, yet they were happy to have left behind the torments of their father's wife, but also leaving the sweetest dreams of their childhood as well as the bitter memories of it, only God knew what fate awaited them."<sup>1</sup>

Betrayal is a recurring theme in most of these early stories as if subconsciously reflecting the atmosphere of frustration and disillusionment that prevailed in the country after the popular resistance was subdued. Betrayal was the leit-motif of the period; Libyans felt abandoned by the whole world community. The writer could not tackle this theme directly, and therefore expresses it indirectly in his stories.

In his third story, "al-Fashal"<sup>2</sup> (Failure), Wahbī al-Būrī resorts to an old technique, that of a story in the form of a letter. The letter is from a friend who lives in Egypt. He thus allows himself

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1. Ibid., p.32.

2. Al-Būrī, "al-Fashal", Lībiyā al Musawwara, December 1936, p.31.



the opportunity of going beyond the restrictive environment of Libyan society and depicts a character indulging in love affairs and the society of women, a playboy who breaks the hearts of his women, abandoning them after they have fallen in love with him, with complete disregard for their feelings and their injured pride. One woman, however, turns the tables on him by captivating his attentions, using every means available to her, so that it is he who falls madly in love. Having achieved her goal, she then leaves him to marry another man, thus avenging those who were the victims of his vanity and betrayal.

The letter form does not provide the best vehicle for him to write a good story, for it is weak and superficial and is permeated with adolescent day dreams. It is significant that he chooses to give the name of Zaynab to his avenging heroine, as he does to the heroine of "Laylat al-Zafāf". Al-Būrī seems to have been influenced by the famous Egyptian novel of that name by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal. It had been published in Cairo in 1914 and republished in the early Thirties. Haykal's novel employs the letter as <sup>one of the</sup> vehicle for the plot, and the theme is also that of frustrated love, of people as victims of the abuses of tradition, denied the right to marry their loved ones, one of the main themes adopted by al-Būrī.

Betrayal is also the theme of "Tabkīt al-Damīr"<sup>1</sup> (The Reproach of Conscience). Giorgi is a spent man living on scraps of food

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1. Al-Būrī, "Tabkīt al-Damīr", Lībiyā al-Musawwara, January 1938, p.30.

and drink in the taverns and cafes of Benghazi; he is always drunk. He was once a wealthy man and lived in Greece, happily married to a beautiful and faithful woman. But then suddenly he fell under the spell of an evil woman, who made him betray his wife and led him towards evil. Under her influence he poisons his wife in order to be able to marry her. However he was unable to endure the remorse which struck him unexpectedly and he confessed his crime and was sent to prison. When released, he left Greece for a life of drunkenness, loneliness and despair in Benghazi.

Betrayal is the dominant theme of al-Būrī's stories even after a period of study in an Italian school in Egypt. He recorded his experience there in a humorous story entitled "Min Fawā'id Mayādīn al-Sibāq"<sup>1</sup> (Some of the Advantages of Racecourses). He describes a meeting with a young woman at the races. On seeing him place a bet, she asks him to recommend a horse for her. Even though he knows nothing of horses, he obliges by suggesting a name at random. The woman leaves only to return jubilant announcing that, thanks to him, she has won some money and in return for his help she offers to spend some of her winnings on a meal for both of them in the best restaurant in town. As he is now penniless, having lost all his money on the horses, he is only too glad to accept the invitation and accompanies her to an expensive restaurant. There a big surprise is in store for

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1. Al-Būrī, "Min Fawā'id Mayādīn al-Sibāq", Lībiyā al-Musawwara, June 1938, p.31.



him, for, as soon as the meal is over, she takes her bag and runs out of the restaurant pretending that she has seen her husband. He does not know what to do, or indeed how he is to pay the bill. The waiter brings him a note from the woman:

"Sir, please forgive me. It has been my wish for a long time to dine in a big restaurant, even if it be only once in my life. I won nothing. The horse you recommended was not even placed. I thank you very much for a wonderful meal. Please forgive me if I have betrayed you. Your mysterious friend."<sup>1</sup>

The smartness and wit of the young woman makes the betrayal of this story somewhat more bearable.

If "Min Fawā'id Mayādīn al-Sibāq" seems somehow an anecdotal story, his experiences of life in Egypt have certainly provided him with a good background for what is without doubt the best of all his stories, entitled "al-Ḥabība al-Majhūla"<sup>2</sup> (The Mysterious Sweetheart). The story is narrated in the first person and al-Būrī makes no secret that the narrator may be identified with himself as he is recalling his own experience. He evokes the atmosphere in Egypt during the month of Ramadān, when one day he goes to see the Egyptian comedian <sup>c</sup>Alī al-Kassār who has come to Alexandria with his troupe. As he takes his seat, there comes and sits next to him a young woman, in the company of her father and mother. Something about this woman is

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1. Ibid., p.32.

2. Al-Būrī, "al-Ḥabība al-Majhūla", Lībiyā al-Musawwara, February 1939, p.27.



electrifying and he is bewitched by her beauty and charm. As the curtain goes up, and the show begins, he is not at all aware of what is happening on stage. <sup>c</sup>Alī Kassār is telling a joke, the audience roars with laughter and we are told by the narrator:

"What was being said, and what people were laughing about I did not know, my eyes, my heart, my thoughts, and all my senses were attracted to the girl sitting next to me."<sup>1</sup>

A large part of the story is devoted to an analysis of the feelings of the male character:

"I felt as if the theatre was empty of all the audience, and there was nobody around me except for the girl whom I could not take my eyes off. I was burning her with my ardent glances, and she must have felt the heat on her face and body for her cheeks became flushed and she became restless in her seat..... I felt ashamed of myself. Why should I have been induced to make this poor girl nervous and spoil her evening? I wanted to follow the show and forget that she was near me, but I could not. I was completely unable. Not for a single moment could I resist looking at that graceful face."<sup>2</sup>

And in spite of the embarrassment the girl seems to have responded to his attentions:

"She leaned with her elbow on the edge of the seat where her half-naked arm touched my arm, I felt as if an electric current was flowing from this ivory arm and electrifying me. I leant towards her and felt the heat of her flesh scorching me,

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1. Ibid., p.28.

2. Ibid., p.28.

the fragrance of her elegant body wafting towards me, penetrating my soul, leading my mind astray. Oh God, could merely the existence of a girl next to me cause all this bewilderment and infatuation."<sup>1</sup>

When the curtain falls and the light goes on, he is at a loss as to whether he was watching the first or the second act. He feels as if everyone in the auditorium is looking at him and was conscious of what he was up to and of the state of his mind. The story develops: the girl responds more positively at the interval, she excuses herself from her family thus providing him with an opportunity to talk to her, but he loses her in the crowd. When the play starts again she gives him a positive enough indication that she would wish to meet him but is afraid of her family. He is unable to pass his address to her. The play ends, her parents take her away in a car and he follows in a taxi, but, once again, loses her. Then he goes through a stage of transformation and change, a sense of loss, a vacuum fills his days and colours his vision of the world:

"Alexandria, with all its joys and places of entertainment has become for me a gloomy and deserted place, it only fills me with despair and hopelessness."<sup>2</sup>

He goes on looking for her everywhere, but with no success. Life becomes unbearable, he decides to leave Alexandria and return to his

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1. Ibid., p.28.

2. Ibid., p.31.

country. As he is driven to the seaport, at a crossroads, a car passes by:

"All of a sudden I feel my heart stand still and the blood stop coursing in my veins."<sup>1</sup>

The girl was in the car, and the car stops just long enough to allow them to exchange an unforgettable glance; again her car disappears in the traffic, and he is driven to his destination.

In this well-written, well-constructed story, al-Būrī displays great craft and authorship, and an ability to demonstrate his talent for discipline, concentration and analysis of his character's feelings. He achieves what has been termed 'the totality of effect'; it is one single moment, but a loaded and pregnant moment, full of emotion. In this story, however, there is no betrayal, rather a sense of great loss, in a society where love is still a taboo. If there is any betrayal, it is that of a society which denies its members the chance to be true to their feelings and their aspirations. A moment at the crossroads of life, an illuminating moment, when a world of dashed hopes, vain expectations and shattered dreams is recaptured and relived.

The humorist in al-Būrī surfaces again in a story entitled "Allāhumma Iksir Rijlah"<sup>2</sup> (O God Break **h**is Leg). Here we have a husband who neglects his wife and stays out most of the time with the

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1. Ibid., p.31.

2. Al-Būrī, "Allāhumma Iksir Rijlah", Lībiyā al-Musawwara, August 1939, p.30.



wife waiting up at nights. One day he is brought home with a broken leg, and is house-bound for a few days during which he grows to love his wife and enjoy her company. When he recovers, he finds himself coming home early with a new-found affection and solicitude for her. But he gradually slips into his old ways and stays out later and later, his wife is once again alone at nights, but now praying that God might break his leg. The man in the story is a mixture of the deceiver and the adventurer. The woman is a helpless creature who submits to her fate and is loyal and faithful to the man who betrays her. The characters of the submissive wife and the adventurous husband recurs throughout al-Būrī's stories.

During 1938, al-Būrī published a few stories in which he once again tried his hand at the letter-format. He does not, however, label them as stories, perhaps because he was aware of their shortcomings. The letter-format seems to restrict his ability to develop a plot or to create a credible situation; it also increases his sentimentality and romantic tendencies:

"Here I am in pain and agony, wishing nothing but to look at you, thinking of nobody but you, seeing nothing but your image, unable to hear any talk save that which is about you, whom I consider the source of life for me, the limits of my contentment, and the bounds of my happiness. And yet I hear that you shun every mention of my name and avoid contact with any acquaintance of mine. Has your heart become as cruel as that?"<sup>1</sup>

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1. Al-Būrī, "Rasā'il Mahzūn", Lībiyā al-Musawwara, July 1938, p.27.

Once again deception and betrayal enter the story, even in this, an imaginary letter, which he himself did not consider fit to be published as a "Short Story of the Month". These letter-format stories are, as he probably sensed himself, well below the level of his other stories.

While with the stories of Ahmad Rāsim Qadrī and previous attempts at story-writing, the Libyan short story still fell between the essay and the short story, with Wahbī al-Būrī the form can be said to have achieved the status of the short story. That is not to say that all of his stories escaped the technical deficiencies that were evident in previous attempts. Among these, the most noticeable is deviation from the main subject, which prevents the story from achieving a totality of impression, an essential feature of the artistic short story. A further deficiency is the author's tedious habit of interfering with the narration to insert some commentary or to pass some moral judgement. He also fails to fill his canvas when describing characters and scenes, choosing character and situations isolated from the richness of their environment. He describes his characters bluntly and directly rather than develop a description from their actions and behaviour.

Yet some of Wahbī al-Būrī's stories are free of these defects, being written in a lucid style with economy and discipline. He recognises the necessity of creating a story that would stand on its own without the embellishment of verse, or reference to classical modes. He is prepared, when necessary, to relate his stories to the

realities of contemporary society. He demonstrates his mastery in "al-Habība al-Majhūla" where he shows himself capable of grasping the key moment and of penetrating it and looking beneath the surface. It is this which gives him a prominent place as a pioneering writer in the history of the Libyan short story. Betrayal, frustrated love and a sense of loss seem to have been the overriding themes of those early short stories; fate plays a major role in determining events and actions, reflecting the atmosphere of national despair which was the dominant emotion of that period of subjugation.



## PART TWO

### APPROACHES

After the Second World War the country was plunged into a political struggle for independence which was finally granted by United Nations resolution in 1949. During the Forties and under the British mandate a few Arabic secondary schools and teaching colleges were established. It was at the hands of the graduates of these schools that the literary life of Libya began to revive, and in the early Fifties the short story became a regular feature in magazines and journals, gradually gaining maturity and refinement.

The short story became the most favoured medium of expression by Libyan writers, and it is now considered not only the most developed but also the most popular genre of literature, so that Ahmad Muhammad <sup>c</sup>Atiyya, an Egyptian critic, was to comment:

"The Libyan short story is the most developed form in Libyan literature after independence."<sup>1</sup>

There are four trends that dominate the Libyan short story writing, which are as follows:

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1. Ahmad Muhammad <sup>c</sup>Atiyya, Fī al-Adab al-Libī al-Hadith (Tripoli 1973), p.59.

1. The emotional approach: in many of the short stories there is an emotional response to situations and experiences, when the harsh realities of life become so difficult to cope with that the characters often resort to a world of daydreams and escapism. When an ideal conception of how things should be clashes with the reality of how things are, the result is usually bitterness and frustration. This approach is characterised by a highly personal treatment and outlook, with an excessively sentimental style.
2. The tell-a-tale approach: writers whose stories are influenced by the tale form or that of the folk tale, are reluctant to conform with the criteria of the modern short story, trying to apply to their stories the technique of the folk tale which draws upon the country's oral tradition. Some adopt the tale format on account of its facile style.
3. The realistic approach: stories written under the influence of the school of social realism, are mainly concerned with a true portrayal of the harsh conditions prevailing in the country and are characterised by a strong sense of identification with the lower classes, concentrating on the positive elements in their characters and putting great emphasis on economic and social factors.
4. The analytical approach: these stories employ psychological analysis, stressing the inner world of the person and concentrating on what happens inside the mind of the character rather than the world around him.



In creating these distinctions we must allow for the possibility that a writer may appear in different guises, that is to say, that he may adopt more than one technique, or he may have developed from one approach to another. Despite this, it is nevertheless possible to characterise all Libyan writers by their dominant use of one of these four basic approaches to the short story. The following examination of the Libyan short story will therefore deal with every writer according to the dominant trend that is present in his stories.

## Chapter Four

### THE EMOTIONAL APPROACH

<sup>c</sup>ABD AL-QĀDIR ABŪ HARRŪS - YŪSUF AL-DILANSĪ -  
MUHAMMAD ABŪ AL-QĀSIM AL-HŪNĪ -  
MUHAMMAD <sup>c</sup>ALĪ AL-SHUWAYHIDĪ -  
LUTFIYYA AL-QABĀ'ILĪ - MARDIYYA AL-NA<sup>cc</sup>ĀS

The first collection of short stories to be published in book form in Libya appeared in 1957. Containing stories by <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Qādir Abū Harrūs that had been published earlier in periodicals and newspapers from the beginning of the Fifties, it was entitled Nufūs Hā'ira<sup>1</sup> (Restless Souls).

As romanticism was the dominant literary trend of that period, it is not surprising that it consisted of stories of an emotional and romantic type that most attracted the attention of writers and editors of both journals and newspaper literary pages alike. It is therefore appropriate to start at this point with an examination of the works of writers who use this approach, and for whom the romantic tendency was not just a stage in their development but remained the prevailing mode in their works. Abū Harrūs was one of the earliest writers of the Fifties to try his hand at writing short stories, in which he used an emotional approach. He calls these stories, portraits (suwar) and in his preface to Nufūs Hā'ira he indicated that he was somewhat hesitant in introducing these stories to the reading public: "These pages would not have seen the light of day in book form had it not been for a moment of weakness."<sup>2</sup>

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1. <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Qādir Abū Harrūs, Nufūs Hā'ira (Tripoli 1957).

2. Abū Harrūs, Nufūs Hā'ira, p.7.



He was aware of the technical defects and artistic deficiencies in his stories and he offers an excuse for his failure to grasp the essentials of short story writing:

"When I write I do not want to be tied to acknowledged lines which I am asked to follow, or predesignated colours; I like to express myself freely and frankly writing for myself and for the people, but under no restrictions."<sup>1</sup>

Thus he explains that he means to give true expression to the thoughts and feelings raging within him.

His stories are not only a manifestation of his dislike for restrictive rules in writing but also of his rebellion against all that was oppressive in the social environment. In "Indamā Yamūt al-Ya's"<sup>2</sup> (When Despair Dies) the first story in his book, he portrays a young man with a very sensitive nature, reflecting on a life which he spends in a search for love. The story has no plot, no real characterisation, lacks discipline and organisation, and is written in a highly personal style and elevated language. Featuring an adolescent boy, it describes his daydreams when he finally finds escape in the image of a girl who appears through the window offering him her love. The writer in his quest to give credibility to the story uses the Libyan colloquial language in a dialogue between the boy and his mother. This helps to set the social and topographical background to the story.

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1. Ibid., p.8.

2. Abū Harrūs, "Indamā Yamūt al-Ya's", Nufūs Hā'ira, p.13.

One of his early stories is "Zilāl ʿalā Wajh Malāk"<sup>1</sup> (Shadows on an Angel's Face), where he depicts two sisters, who in their anxiety to satisfy their inner urge for love and romance, fall in love with the same person, resulting in anguish and sorrow.

The theme of frustrated love is a favourite with him, and he excels when describing the emotions of a girl in her longing for love. To grant these two girls a comfortable life he places them in a middle class family and, for the sake of credibility, he gives a detailed description of their house, the streets that lead to it, as well as an account of their school life. He is also at pains to give a lengthy description of their physical appearance. Although the two sisters inhabit the same house he curiously has one of them writing a letter to the other sister revealing her love for ʿAlī, unaware of her sister's affections for the same man. Her sister is so thunderstruck at this communication that she immediately falls ill. In describing her feelings the writer displays his belief in the romantic principle of the return to nature, as when she wishes to live like an animal in the forest,

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1. Abū Harrūs's "Zilāl ʿalā Wajh Malāk" was first published in the daily Tarabulus al-Gharb in two parts, the first part appearing on 19 August 1952. It was later included in a modified form in Nufūs Hā'ira, p.61.

"... jumping nimbly from branch to branch, swimming naked in the lakes and streams, free of any bonds, free of any inherited inhibitions, free to choose a lover for herself from among the animals, and to live with him, to give her every passion, feeling and emotion, and her body."<sup>1</sup>

The forest is also the setting for another story, "<sup>C</sup>Azīza".<sup>2</sup>

Here, however, the two main characters, <sup>C</sup>Azīz and <sup>C</sup>Azīza, live there, and for them the forest is not a dream, it is their home, their everyday world, in short, their reality. In this story the writer offers us his conception of what constitutes an ideal world. In markedly poetic language, Abū Harrūs demonstrates his ability to capture a world beyond the realm of our everyday experience. Here he is at his best as a romantic writer, as a dreamer, as a poet, but not as a short story teller. He introduces a world with very little resemblance to reality, a world of perfect beauty, a dream-like land full of flowers, streams, colourful birds, gazelles, floating in the light of an ever-shining moon. There in the forest <sup>C</sup>Azīza meets the prince of her dreams, <sup>C</sup>Azīz, and they live together in a cottage among the birds, trees and flowers, swimming naked in the brooks, expressing their happiness at being together, away from that so-called civilisation which only complicates man's life and alienates him from the simple, innocent world of primitive nature.

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1. Abū Harrūs, Nufūs Hā'ira, p.95.

2. Abū Harrūs, "<sup>C</sup>Azīza", Nufūs Hā'ira, p.45.



"<sup>C</sup>Azīz said as if murmuring a prayer: 'I had this feeling when I was in the city, <sup>C</sup>Azīza, I felt people were bewildered, restless, lost. There was something hopelessly missing in their lives. I told you a moment ago what this missing thing was, I told you how love can give value to our life, that is what the people in the city are missing. Yet it's within their reach, but selfishness, conceit and what they call custom and sense of shame force them to withdraw from it.'"<sup>1</sup>

Now the writer contrasts the world he objects to with his, an ideal world. For this reason, <sup>C</sup>Azīz rejects the world of the city and lives happily in his cottage in the forest. In a subjective, passionate and simple narrative style, the writer paints a colourful picture of a world of love and innocence, all evoked in abstract language. He creates fairy-tale characters, placing his faith, as in most of his stories, in love.

After allowing his reader to view his ideal world, he takes him into a world of suffocation and deprivation, his real world, in a story called "<sup>C</sup>Indamā Yufqad al-Amal"<sup>2</sup> (When Hope is Lost) where a man and a woman are being married without having even met each other and discover their incompatibility on the night of their wedding. The black humour of the story provides a means for the writer to free himself from his previous dependence on sentimentality and allows him to grasp the mood of the situation. In "<sup>C</sup>Dumya Nāfi'a"<sup>3</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.55.

2. Abū Harrūs, "<sup>C</sup>Indamā Yufqad al-Amal", Nufūs Hā'ira, p.97.

3. Abū Harrūs, "<sup>C</sup>Dumya Nāfi'a", Nufūs Hā'ira, p.115.

(A Useful Doll) he offers some hope to those who were condemned to marry without previous acquaintanceship. The husband in the story starts introducing his wife to the same books he reads and they both succeed in building up a healthy relationship through their shared experiences.

Another writer of the same romantic tendency who also started writing in the early Fifties is Yūsuf al-Dilansī. Although he wrote a large number of short stories, they never appeared in a collection and have remained scattered throughout various journals. In most of his stories he seems, above all, to reach out for his reader's sympathy by resorting to every means possible whether they be exaggerated events, passionate love letters, great sacrifices, sudden illness, or even death, resulting from the mental anguish created by social restrictions and taboos. Some of his earliest stories were written in the form of a dialogue between a man and a woman, and although they cannot be considered proper stories, in which are developed situations and characters, they, at least, provided a vehicle for his ideas.

"Laylāya al-Khālida"<sup>1</sup> (My Eternal Laylā) is dedicated to the woman "who wants to enslave those who were born to be free".<sup>2</sup> The female character in the story is jealous of the greater love in her

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1. Yūsuf al-Dilansī, "Laylāya al-Khālida", Hunā Tarābulus al-Gharb (Tripoli), 1 May 1954, p.11. This story appeared under his pen-name, Ibn al-Andalus.

2. Ibid., p.11.



man's life, and shows her fury whenever he dares speak of this, his greater passion. We learn towards the end of the story that the other great passion in his life is his love for his country. This fragile idea is hardly the stuff around which to weave a satisfactory story, it is merely the expression of a noble idea which suffers from his naive treatment.

In another story called "Anf al-Ta'rīkh fī al-Raghām"<sup>1</sup> (The Nose of History in the Dust), he uses dialogue to convey his message. His main character is a man who addresses his lady friend and ridicules the rulers of our modern age, who, in his opinion, could only go down in history as the men who have humiliated it, instead of rendering it dignified and glorious like the rulers of the ancient world.

In his more developed and mature stories we see greater attention to situations and characterisation as in his story entitled "Allāhumma Innī Sā'ima"<sup>2</sup> (By God... and Me Fasting), where he presents a man and a woman trapped in a marriage of convenience. The story takes place during the month of Ramadān when emotions are heightened; an argument breaks out and the wife begins to voice her discontent at her marriage to an older man and the poor conditions within which she has to live. The husband considers thoughts such as these to be unbecoming during the holy month of Ramadān when it

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1. Al-Dilansī, "Anf al-Ta'rīkh fī al-Raghām", Hunā Tarābulus al-Gharb, 1 May 1954, p.12.

2. Al-Dilansī, "Allāhumma Innī Sā'ima", Hunā Tarābulus al-Gharb, 1 June 1954, p.18.



behoves peoples to be charitable and generous. On hearing the call for the morning prayer, indicating the dawn of another day, the woman immediately becomes submissive again and asks God's forgiveness. The good will of Ramadān has once again prevailed. Here the writer is depicting a world where people must rise above their circumstances and show their capacity for endurance. Although this story is loaded with synonyms and idle phrases and an unnecessary introduction which only hinders the development of the story, it is, on the whole, of a better construction than his previous attempts.

One of al-Dilansī's typical themes is frustrated love, which he first broaches in "Lahn Ka'ib"<sup>1</sup> (Bleak Melody), in which the woman in the story makes the ultimate sacrifice when she dies because of love. The story is written in the form of a letter, a technique used many times by the writer. He dedicates the story to a woman "for whom the heart beats, the soul yearns, while she remains unaware".<sup>2</sup> The letter is addressed to the narrator and is from a woman on her death-bed who now confesses her love for him, while he is all the while in love with her sister. She knows that her love for him is without hope, and has therefore decided to put an end to her life:

"I will depart from this world leaving it with all its evils and vices, with all its hypocrisy and falsehood; I will be liberated from base desires and cheap sentiment, to fly freely in a world of spirituality and purity."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Al-Dilansī, "Lahn Ka'ib", Hunā Tarābulus al-Gharb, 16 July 1954, p.14.

2. Ibid., p.14.

3. Ibid., p.16.

To add to the pathos the narrator adds a note to the letter in which he admits that his true love was for the correspondent and not for her sister, and that he had written a letter sometime earlier, in which he had declared his love to her but he had been unable to find an opportunity to deliver it, and there it was, the letter, still in his pocket. In this story, al-Dilansī has alighted on an ideal subject matter for a short story, that is, the secret passion for a person who all the while remains unaware of this love. But the writer loses his opportunity to develop the story through his fondness for exaggeration and over-dramatisation.

Most of al-Dilansī's characters are caught up in situations from which there is no escape; they either opt for death or resign themselves to a life of suffering and unhappiness. Death is the fate of the eponymous heroine of another story "Iḥsān",<sup>1</sup> which is dedicated to the Lebanese poetess Mayy Ziyāda "and to her eternal spirit", although there does not appear to be any clear connection between Mayy and the heroine of the story. In this story he uses a technique of presenting the narrator as merely a medium for another person's story. The narrator, one day, meets a man in a café, who tells him how he came to know Iḥsān while still at school and how he fell in love with her, and began to see her regularly. Iḥsān, for her part, found in him some refuge from the gloomy house of her sick father and her stepmother. When her father dies, her stepmother can

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1. Al-Dilansī, "Iḥsān", Hunā Tarābulus al-Gharb, 1 February 1955, p.12.



no longer afford to live in the same house and she takes Ihsān and her brother to live with their relatives, and as a result he loses contact with her, until one day, by chance he sees her brother in a hospital and learns that Ihsān is dying. The writer does not indicate whether the illness resulted from the poverty to which she was exposed after the death of her father, or from separation from the man she loved. All we know is that she is dying and at the same time driving her lover insane with grief. The narrator then tells us that it is now a year since she died and still, every day, the poor distraught lover comes to this café, near the graveyard, waiting for her funeral. One would have thought that a man who had some illusions about his departed lover would not be waiting for her funeral. Rather we would expect him to be waiting for her to come again so as to allow him to relive some of the moments they have shared in the past. By having the man waiting for the funeral, the writer adds nothing save an element of improbability. As the story comes from an insane man, we are left in some doubt as to whether it represents a reality or the fantasy of a madman.

The same technique is used again in one of al-Dilansī's last stories, namely the presentation of the story indirectly by an acquaintance of the narrator. Under the title "Ughniyya Li-Ifriqiya"<sup>1</sup>

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1. Al-Dilansī, "Ughniyya Li-Ifriqiya", al-Ruwwād (Tripoli), December 1965, p.48.



(A Song for Africa), the scene is set in a hospital in Rome, where one of the female patients learns that there is a writer from Africa in the hospital, and asking to meet him, tells him her story. There is a new mood in the story, that of hope and optimism; happiness can be obtainable after all, but there is much misery and suffering before the story achieves its happy conclusion. Her story starts among the ruins of the Second World War when she was still a young girl. Although she was put into the care of an orphanage, that in itself did not destroy her chances for a better life, and she finished her education to become a qualified doctor. She falls in love with an Italian poet who goes to live in an African country, where, he believed, he would better be able to fulfil his ideals by working in a newly-independent country. He sends her a letter asking her to join him, and she intends to just as soon as she has recovered enough to be fit to travel. The poet had written:

"Come to me to start a new life in the place where life began, to embrace the ever shining sun, to see with pride, hope and pleasure the future being born with every new day."<sup>1</sup>

The doctor ends her tale with these comments:

"My soul embraces him over the hot sands and under the lemon and almond trees, sending from afar my affection for the song he writes about the future that is born every day in Africa. When I was admitted to hospital to have an operation on my lung, I was only performing a simple duty, that of preserving my health, not only

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1. Ibid., p.50.

for me but for the sake of the man I love.....  
Nothing will accompany me but his book of verse,  
A Song for Africa, which Italy now reads with  
enthusiasm."<sup>1</sup>

In this story, Yūsuf al-Dilansī seems unable to avoid being didactic. He also touches on the role of the writer, when the doctor addresses the narrator:

"You are a committed writer, I am told. The task of an artist is to justify the weakness of human beings, as well as to present their strengths."<sup>2</sup>

Yūsuf al-Dilansī was true to himself, for he has attempted to justify the weakness of his characters, as well as bring out what is good and noble in the human heart.

Abū Harrūs and al-Dilansī were among a large group of writers who tried their hand at the romantic story,<sup>3</sup> influenced by Egyptian

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1. Ibid., p.50.

2. Ibid., p.48.

3. Among these writers were Muḥammad Farīd Siyāla who published a number of short stories and a novel called I<sup>c</sup>tirāfāt Insān (Confessions of a Human Being), Muḥammad al-Shāwish, who wrote a few stories and then dedicated his efforts to journalism, Khalīfa al-Tillīsī, who turned to criticism and historical studies, Muḥammad Abū <sup>c</sup>Āmir, who channeled his talents to writing radio drama, and <sup>c</sup>Alī al-Ghūdī who abandoned writing.

and Lebanese popular romantic magazines, and celebrated romantic writers such as Mayy Ziyāda and Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān in the case of al-Dilansī, and Yūsuf al-Sibā<sup>c</sup>ī and Ihsān <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Quddūs in the case of Abū Harrūs.

The sentimental tendency gradually evolved into other approaches which were to dominate short story writing. More mature and developed styles and techniques were being adopted by new writers, yet the tendency to write stories of highly emotional and sentimental colouring remained. However, the later writers of this mode were to improve on the work of their predecessors and infuse the old technique with newly-adapted styles, while others ignored these developments and continued to produce stories with very little artistic merit. Among this latter group is Muḥammad Abū al-Qāsim al-Hūnī, who started as early as 1960, bringing out three volumes of short stories. However, the improbabilities and coincidences in his stories are remarkably frequent. "Intiṣār"<sup>1</sup> (Triumph), is one of his early stories. The story is narrated in the first person, the theme being the conflict between two personalities. A worker in a factory represents all the good virtues, bravery, self-sacrifice, honesty and care for others, while the factory director represents evil and selfishness, his features being "hard and cruel" and he has a "stony heart, full of brutality".<sup>2</sup>

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1. Muḥammad Abū al-Qāsim al-Hūnī, "Intiṣār", Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt (Tripoli 1978), p.5.

2. Ibid., p.5.



He plays the role of the watchdog for the owner of the factory. One day, the worker is summoned to see the director who starts reproaching him for his activities inside the factory, particularly his attempts to organise the workers into a union. The director threatens to dismiss him if he continues meddling in the workers' affairs. Although he is aware of the consequences of dismissal, he stands firm to his principles and is given a day or two to consider his position. In this conflict the worker is the weak party, powerless and frightened despite the brave face he puts on, while the director appears strong, powerful and domineering. But this situation changes a few days later, when they meet again in the wake of a workers' uprising, after which the director is the weak and helpless party while the worker is powerful, domineering and triumphant.

This indeed is the raw material for a good short story, but al-Hunī's style, construction and treatment fails to live up to the theme of the story. He has a tendency to describe his characters' virtues instead of eliciting these virtues from their behaviour and actions. He even has the narrator addressing the reader:

"You do not know, my friend, what unemployment means; being unemployed is the psychological murder of a human being."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.9.

He also falls victim to the weakness of the early romantic writers, that of categorising his characters as either good or evil; there are no shades other than black and white.

When dealing with the theme of love in "Ashwāq"<sup>1</sup> (Yearnings), he creates a farm owned by an elderly man who lives alone with his daughter, a young and attractive woman. He also has a beautiful peasant girl on the farm, to which is brought a young agricultural engineer. To achieve a climax in this romantic theme he has the young man fall ill thus allowing himself the opportunity of giving full rein to the emotions of his female characters, who compete in showing their love for the young man. This is a highly unlikely situation within a Libyan context. The young man is more attracted to the peasant girl, and the owner's daughter becomes jealous and vindictive. At this point the elements of a class struggle are introduced to give further colouring to an already overworked canvas. "Ashwāq" is more of a condensed novel than a short story, in which is depicted a social environment alien to Libyan society, echoing some Egyptian novelists, especially Muḥammad <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Ḥalīm <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh.

Al-Hūnī seems to think people worth writing about only after they are struck by disaster, be it earthquake, death or some other calamity of fate. In "Ṭifl wa-<sup>c</sup>Īd"<sup>2</sup> (A Child and a Feastday), the disaster takes the form of the extreme poverty afflicting a family in

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1. Al-Hūnī, "Ashwāq", Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt, p.15.

2. Al-Hūnī, "Ṭifl wa-<sup>c</sup>Īd", Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt, p.23.

which the child feels the humiliation of watching all his friends parade their new feastday clothes while he can only wear his usual ragged shirt. When his father realises the depths of his son's misery, he feels so bitter that he becomes determined to avenge this humiliation on a society which tolerates such inequalities.

In "Qaṭarāt al-Dumū<sup>C</sup>"<sup>1</sup> (Teardrops), he describes a disastrous earthquake in which a helpless child runs through the ruins screaming and trying to find rescuers for his father who is trapped beneath the rubble that was their house. In three other stories it is war which provides the background of disaster. "Ghadan Naltaqī"<sup>2</sup> (We Meet Tomorrow), is about a man who is separated from an orphan girl he loves because of his involvement in the war. "Al-<sup>C</sup>Ā'id"<sup>3</sup> (The Returnee), is also about a man who goes to war leaving the responsibility for the family and the shop to his young son. The question that arises from these, his "war" stories, is which war he is referring to; is it an imaginary war, or could it be the Libyan war against the Italians? But the atmosphere he depicts is alien to that of the Libyan war, for the troops return victorious. Other details also clash with the history of the various conflicts in recent times, leaving as the only explanation possible a desire by the writer to emulate those Egyptian stories that were

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1. Al-Hūnī, "Qaṭarāt al-Dumū<sup>C</sup>", Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt, p.37.

2. Al-Hūnī, "Ghadan Naltaqī", Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt, p.29.

3. Al Hūnī, "Al-<sup>C</sup>Ā'id", Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt, p.65.



written after the Suez War of 1956. His third "war" story, entitled "al-Isrār"<sup>1</sup> (Determination) clearly refers to the war of liberation against the Italians. The first half of the story is taken up by the memories of the war by an old man. This unfortunately contributes nothing to the structure and development of the story.

In "Wa-Akhīran <sup>c</sup>Ādat"<sup>2</sup> (And Finally She Returns), the disaster is a fatal illness, from which he squeezes every last drop of sentimentality:

"As he turned his face away to hide the tears running down his cheeks, her heart felt deeply for him, and she too felt the tears that were about to flood from her eyes; she leant over him, and began to wipe his tears with tenderness and compassion."<sup>3</sup>

But there is no tenderness or compassion in his title story, "Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt"<sup>4</sup> (Crack in the Mirror), which depicts a disastrous marriage that falls apart after years of fighting and argument, as seen through the eyes of the child of this ill-fated marriage. The child who shoulders a large responsibility at a tender age is a recurring theme in al-Hūnī's stories. In "Qaṭarāt al-Dumū<sup>c</sup>" the child is responsible for rescuing his dying father, in "al-<sup>c</sup>Ā'id"

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1. Al-Hūnī, "al-Isrār", Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt, p.95.

2. Al-Hūnī, "Wa-Akhīran <sup>c</sup>Ādat", Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt, p.65.

3. Ibid., p.62.

4. Al-Hūnī, "Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt", Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt, p.85.

the child is forced to take over the responsibilities of running the business and looking after the house. While in "Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt" the child abandons the ruins of his family life and finds his own future. The writer's obsession with this theme sometimes forces him to create bizarre characters among his children. The child in "al-Hanīn"<sup>1</sup> (The Yearning), for example, has an enquiring mind more appropriate to an intellectual of mature years than to a young boy. When the boy surveys the size of the family for which he has now become responsible he takes to wondering about the social consequences of human reproduction:

"He felt that birth control is an obligation required by necessity, especially as life's complexities increased day by day."<sup>2</sup>

This is not an attempt at humour; it is merely absurd.

Even when al-Hūnī, occasionally, touches upon a subject which has great potential for a short story, he invariably fails to carry it off. An example of this is "Diyā<sup>c</sup> fī al-Madīna"<sup>3</sup> (Lost in the City), where he writes of a man who has grown discontented with his life in the village and ventures into the city where he takes a job, following which his wife senses some change in his attitude towards her. With this promising theme, the writer,

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1. Al-Hūnī, "al-Hanīn", Sharkh fī al-Mir'at, p.45.

2. Ibid., p.45.

3. al-Hūnī, "Diyā<sup>c</sup> fī al-Madīna", Sharkh fī al-Mir'āt, p.51.

unfortunately, fails to exploit the potential of the psychological changes in villagers who have migrated into unfamiliar urban environments. He touches on some of these changes but very quickly drowns them in a flow of irrelevant detail.

A more satisfying handling of the emotional short story can be observed in the stories of Muḥammad al-Shuwayhidī, a writer who started writing in the early Sixties. He, too, is fond of passionate prose. Although the exponents of the various literary genres have developed their crafts and adopted more sophisticated techniques and treatment, his romantic enthusiasm remained very little influenced by surrounding developments. The major defect of his stories is a lack of unity, but his use of language, his subject matter, his attempts to analyse the behaviour of his characters and his skilful use of dialogue redeem what would otherwise be very banal stories. Another virtue of some of his stories is the implication that the events carry on beyond what is actually portrayed in the stories themselves.

The theme that looms large in his stories is the vanity of life. In "Aqwāl Shāhid <sup>c</sup>Iyān"<sup>1</sup> (The Testimony of an Eye Witness), he attempts to describe life in its different phases and vicissitudes. The story is told by an eye witness who has observed the life of a woman from her youth to her old age. In it we first see Ḥayāt

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1. Muḥammad <sup>c</sup>Alī al-Shuwayhidī, "Aqwāl Shāhid <sup>c</sup>Iyān", in Aqwāl Shāhid <sup>c</sup>Iyān, (Tripoli 1976), p.28.



as an energetic and cheerful young girl who is loved by everyone in the neighbourhood; then Hayāt as a passionate woman disappointed in her first love; then Hayāt as an arrogant, vengeful woman who marries a wealthy old man to inherit his money; then Hayāt, the merry widow, who gradually drifts into virtual prostitution; then the repentant conscious-stricken and chastened Hayāt; then Hayāt, the wife once more, but to a man twenty years her junior; then Hayāt, the desperate, lustful woman, and towards the end, a ruined and dying Hayāt, uttering with her last gasp a few words; "Here ends the journey, here ends the farce".<sup>1</sup> The writer does not tell us much about the nature of the eye witness who spends his life observing the woman, although it becomes obvious that the witness is time itself. However, even with symbols like this, a writer needs to draw a credible character and leave the interpretation to his readers. A short story can hardly be the ideal medium for relating the life-story of a person, for one will soon run out of space. When writers make such attempts the results are not always satisfactory.

In "al-Rajul alladhī Māt"<sup>2</sup> (The Man Who Died), he uses death as an occasion by which his characters can reflect on the falsehood and absurdity of life. The main character in the story is the son of the dead man. His father had had so many plans for him; he was,

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1. Ibid., p.35.

2. Al-Shuwayhidī, "al-Rajul alladhī Māt", Aqwāl Shāhid<sup>c</sup> Iyān, p.68.

for instance, going to obtain a loan for him, by which he could buy a house, and he was also arranging his wedding to Halīma, when he suddenly died while still in good health. What then was the use of a loan, of a house, indeed of a wife and family, as long as life was so unpredictable? The son begins to doubt everything: one comes to life, toils to achieve something, but as soon as he achieves it, or even before he achieves it, he dies; so what is the use? But after a while the son abandons his gloomy thoughts, he eats his dinner, thinks seriously about fixing an appointment with the bank manager and another date for his marriage to Halīma. Although he recognises the futility of life, a natural inclination within him drives him to continue to improve his life.

But this pursuit of a better life can sometimes blur our vision and cause us to forget what the essentials of life are, and it sometimes confuses our priorities. "Al-Thaman"<sup>1</sup> (The Price) is about a man who is so much absorbed by his commercial business that he neglects his children and his family life; this negligence and greed results in the death of his only child. The story is based on a coincidence which loses it some of its effect. Furthermore it is weakly constructed and carries no merit except for the fact that the writer deliberately dramatises his events to highlight his concept of vanity, and uses death to play on the contrast,

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1. Al-Shuwayhidī, "al-Thaman", Aqwāl Shāhid <sup>c</sup>Iyān. p.20.

The setting in "Bandūl al-Zaman"<sup>1</sup> (The Pendulum of Time) is a hospital where a husband waits anxiously while his wife gives birth to their first child. The child is born but the mother dies. The husband, in a state of shock, sees the whole episode as an example of the treachery and betrayal of time, an example of the vanity of life. The story is conveyed in a poetical, easy-flowing language, in which he also uses the deliberate repetition of certain words and phrases to create the desired effect. But the story falls short of achieving the total effect. The writer fills the story with the husband's lustful thoughts about the nurse, which is not in keeping with the anguish and anxiety the writer would wish him to suffer; even when he is receiving the news of his wife's death, the husband is still able to view the potentialities of the nurse as a sexual object:

"I followed her lips, they were rosy and delicious, her breasts were nicely pointed; Halīma, now dead, also had delicious rosy cheeks and nicely pointed breasts. But she is dead."<sup>2</sup>

Clearly the writer wishes to make a statement: even beauty can be a metaphor for the vanity of life, because it too is threatened by death. However the comment is very much out of place.

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1. Al-Shuwayhidī, "Bandūl al-Zaman", Aqwāl Shāhid<sup>c</sup> Iyān, p.4.

2. Ibid., p.10.



In "Rubbamā Tashruq al-Shams Ghadan"<sup>1</sup> (Perhaps the Sun will Rise Tomorrow), al-Shuwayhidī expresses a sense of frustration and disappointment with the prevailing negative attitudes of his countrymen towards the conditions of life around him. The central character in the story is a young man who works for the well-being of the community, who volunteers to educate the illiterate, and in return only receives mockery and ridicule from his idle friends who spend their time playing cards in a cafe. He is almost like the child in another story of his, "al-Mawja wa-al-Rahīl"<sup>2</sup> (The Tide and the Departure), who labours hard to build a sandcastle, only to see it washed away by the tide which leaves him crying at the vanity of his efforts.

Most of al-Shuwayhidī's characters live in a huge vacuum, spending their lives trying unsuccessfully to fill it somehow. The man in "al-Ghusn wa-al-Shajara"<sup>3</sup> (The Branch and the Tree), tries his best to live up to the ideals set for him by his father, but he fails. In "Hiwār Muzdawaj"<sup>4</sup> (Dialogue), the central character tries to overcome the emptiness of his life by returning to his home town. In "Zaghārīd al-Malā'ika"<sup>5</sup> (Angels' Jubilations), two elderly people, a

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1. Al-Shuwayhidī, "Rubbamā Tashruq al-Shams Ghadan", Aqwāl Shāhid<sup>c</sup> Iyān, p.4

2. Al-Shuwayhidī, "al-Mawja wa-al-Rahīl", Aqwāl Shāhid<sup>c</sup> Iyān, p.82.

3. Al-Shuwayhidī, "al-Ghusn wa-al-Shajara", Ahzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid, (Benghazi 1973), p.23.

4. Al-Shuwayhidī, "Hiwār Muzdawaj", Aqwāl Shāhid<sup>c</sup> Iyān, p.12.

5. Al-Shuwayhidī, "Zaghārīd al-Malā'ika", Aqwāl Shāhid<sup>c</sup> Iyān, p.36.

man and a woman, are attracted towards each other when they discover that they share a sense of loneliness, both having been abandoned by their grown-up sons and daughters. In their determination to make up for their loss they decide, from their first meeting, to live together. In "Ḥubb Shadīd al-Waṭ'a"<sup>1</sup> (Pressing Love), and "Ba<sup>c</sup>d min Taṣawwurinā"<sup>2</sup> (Some of our Assumptions), and "al-Khafqa al-Bikr"<sup>3</sup> (The Virgin Pulse), we see how the characters try, hopelessly, to fill the emptiness in their lives with love. They search in earnest but they all fail. The protagonist in "Ḥubb Shadīd al-Waṭ'a" even goes to a charm-maker to induce his sweetheart to reciprocate his love, but instead of obtaining love he ends in jail because of the harrassment he inflicts on his sweetheart.

It is evident that all al-Shuwayhidī's career in journalism has exerted a great influence over his style and treatment, and we frequently come across phrases that could come straight from a news item, as, for example: "The confrontation which was supported by the old people's understanding...."<sup>4</sup>, or "The man's face was covered with artificial optimism".<sup>5</sup> Another lapse in style is his tendency to

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1. Al-Shuwayhidī, "Ḥubb Shadīd al-Waṭ'a", Aqwāl Shāhid<sup>c</sup> Iyān, p.70.
  2. Al-Shuwayhidī, "Ba<sup>c</sup>d min Taṣawwurinā" Aḥzan al-Yawm al-Wāhid, p.7.
  3. Al-Shuwayhidī, "al-Khafqat al-Bikr", Aḥzan al-Yawm al-Wāhid, p.93.
  4. Al-Shuwayhidī, "Aḥzan al-Yawm al-Wāhid", p.10.
  5. Ibid., p.33.



write meaningless sentences, as when describing the life in a back street, "The cars racing in madness, producing half-accepted noise";<sup>1</sup> or to conjure up obscure and possibly meaningless metaphors:

"Monotonous you are, deceitful pendulum of time,  
boring and murderous, but you are to be  
murdered by the eternal time, for time remains,  
time remains."<sup>2</sup>

The contribution of women writers to the short story genre in Libya does not rank high in comparison with that of their male counterparts. This is to be expected, given the social circumstances and lack of opportunity allowed to women. Only recently has the social climate begun to undergo rapid change due to the spread of education and the radical social and political policies implemented after the 1969 revolution. However, a few women writers did attempt to describe their experiences of the inferior social position imposed upon them by a traditional social structure. Their stories most resemble the contents of the letters page in a woman's magazine, drawing mainly on problems of domestic life, of which they draw a more realistic portrayal than most other writers discussed in this section. Indeed, they are sometimes merely reporting actual events in life, and are so absorbed by its trivialities that there is a general tendency to resort to naive and superficial treatments. These

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1. Ibid., p.33.

2. Al-Shuwayhidī, Aqwāl Shāhid ʿIyān, p.11.



stories fall within the category of the emotional story due to their personal and subjective approach which give their writings an unmistakably autobiographical colouring. Also characteristic of women's writings is a marked dependence on sentimentalism when talking of platonic love, and the idealization of female characters in an attempt to redress the balance in a life dominated by male chauvinism. Their world is narrow, monotonous and repetitive and even the names they give to their characters tend to repeat themselves. Rarely do we find a woman writer of this period able to penetrate beneath the surface and give real insights into what women really think and feel.

One of the two most noted women writers is Luṭfiyya al-Qabā'ilī, who started writing in the mid-Sixties, as editor of a woman's magazine. She found herself writing short pieces of prose which she later assembled into a collection, which she published in a book entitled Amānī Mu<sup>C</sup>allaba<sup>1</sup> (Canned Wishes). Introducing into most of her stories a feminine viewpoint regarding relationships between men and women, in the main, her stories are didactic, written for the purpose of making women aware of their rights, and warning them against committing follies and mistakes which might result in misery and hardship. She seeks a fairer treatment for women but she speaks from a traditional standpoint and conforms to the accepted patterns and norms of

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1. Luṭfiyya al-Qabā'ilī, Amānī Mu<sup>C</sup>allaba, (Tripoli 1977).

behaviour, operating from within the social code. She asks for reforms which are compatible with her loyalty to the cherished values of her society. Never does she venture to question the domination of men over women or the family's right to interfere in a woman's life.

The opening story in her book is called "al-Kidhba al-Ūlā"<sup>1</sup> (The First Lie), a naive story in which she introduces us to Fāṭima and comments that she deserved to be divorced because she had defied her husband and gone to the fair without his permission. Al-Qabā'ilī makes it clear that she disapproves of unfaithfulness either in men or women; infidelity is always attributed to men, her women feature as faithful, dedicated, sincere and compassionate creatures. In her story, "al-Risāla"<sup>2</sup> (The Letter), Aḥmad deceives Fāṭima, his loyal and faithful wife. He receives a letter from a woman friend in Italy, and pretending to have some business in Rome, he indulges in a lecherous holiday in Italy, during the course of which he dies. The writer sees fit to kill him as a punishment for his infidelity.

In a story called "<sup>C</sup>Adālat al-Samā'"<sup>3</sup> (The Justice of Heaven), Aḥmad divorces his devoted wife and marries a wayward woman, because his previous wife had failed to bear him a son. The new wife, however, only gives him more girls, and when he finds out that she is a whore,

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1. Al-Qabā'ilī, "al-Kidhba al-Ūlā", Amānī Mu<sup>C</sup>allaba, p.7.

2. Al-Qabā'ilī, "al-Risāla", Amānī Mu<sup>C</sup>allaba, p.65.

3. Al-Qabā'ilī. "<sup>C</sup>Adālat al-Samā'", Amānī Mu<sup>C</sup>allaba, p.62.



the shock kills him. The writer sees his death as a punishment from heaven, obviously confusing her own idea of justice with that of heaven. In "Wa-Altaqaynā"<sup>1</sup> (And We Met), the husband goes to study abroad leaving his wife on her own for two years. While he is away he divorces her and marries another woman. She is hurt but she rises above her circumstances and with time on her hands she decides to continue her university education. In the course of her studies she meets her former husband who is full of apologies and regret. But for her it was all too late. The repentant and regretful husband features in many stories, an example of this is a simple autobiographical narrative entitled "Kalimat Sharaf"<sup>2</sup> (A Word of Honour) where Ahmad turns the house of joy and happiness to a house of sorrow and sadness when he starts staying out late at night neglecting his home and wife. But as he is a good-natured man he returns to his senses and abandons his night life to become the good faithful husband he used to be, giving his wife his word of honour not to leave her again. The central character in "Wa Ghafirtu Lak"<sup>3</sup> (I Have Forgiven You), acts similarly, but Ahmad in "Muqārana Sa<sup>c</sup>aba"<sup>4</sup> (Difficult Comparison), seems to have gone beyond repentance. It was difficult for Ahmad's wife to see the man she loves so passionately drift away

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1. Al-Qabā'ilī, "Wa-Altaqaynā", Amānī Mu<sup>c</sup>allaba, p.26.

2. Al-Qabā'ilī, "Kalimat Sharaf" Amānī Mu<sup>c</sup>allaba, p.58.

3. Al-Qabā'ilī, "Wa Ghafirtu Lak", Amānī Mu<sup>c</sup>allaba, p.48.

4. Al-Qabā'ilī, "Muqārana Sa<sup>c</sup>aba", Amānī Mu<sup>c</sup>allaba, p.50.



from her. She finds her comfort in reciting some verses from the Holy Quran. That man is more or less like Ahmad in "al-Lufafa al-Ṣafrā"<sup>1</sup> (The Yellow Bundle), who commits the sin of coming home late, drunk, which the writer considers a disaster for his family, and his wife feels that life will never be the same again. There is also the other Ahmad who is torn between his love for his wife and his loyalty to his mother. In "Kibriyā'"<sup>2</sup> (Pride), Ahmad is unable to please either his ill mother or his angry wife. Although he realises that his wife is unfairly accused of neglecting the old woman, his male pride prevents him from apologising to her. His dilemma lingers on unlike the man in "Ba<sup>c</sup>da al-Rahīl"<sup>3</sup> (After the Departure), who finds a solution to his problems when he drives his car angrily and kills himself in a car accident, leaving the mother and the wife bereaved as a result of their folly.

A good number of these stories describe the emotions of love, but unlike love in most other romantic stories, it is usually triumphant in the end.

Most of al-Qabā'ilī's stories are full of defects and limitations in their artistic presentation, being closer to essays than short stories, with colourless characters, static situations, stereotyped fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives. Naive

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1. Al-Qabā'ilī, "al-Lufafa al-Ṣafrā'", Amānī Mu<sup>c</sup>allaba, p.13.

2. Al-Qabā'ilī, "Kibriyā'", in Amānī Mu<sup>c</sup>allaba, p.52.

3. Al-Qabā'ilī, "Ba<sup>c</sup>da al-Rahīl", Amānī Mu<sup>c</sup>allaba, p.88.

optimism is the dominant colour and the style suffers from monotony, clichés and generalisation in her descriptive narration: "Fate had surrounded her with all that Eve could dream of, education, good behaviour, beauty, attractiveness and an ideal husband."<sup>1</sup> The stories are full of repetition of phrases, situations, themes and characters' names, Ahmad being the name of most of the male characters. The only merit that these stories have is that they come closer to portraying real life than any other stories of the romantic approach. They may have made good reading in a woman's magazine, but when presented as a book of short stories they cannot withstand the scrutiny of the critical reader.

Mardiyya al-Na<sup>CC</sup>ās follows, more or less, the same pattern, abides by the same rules and chooses her characters from the same realm. A journalist, who started writing in the late Sixties, she has also written two romantic novels, Shay' min al-Dif'a<sup>2</sup> (Some Warmth), and al-Mazrūf al-Azraq<sup>3</sup> (The Blue Envelope). Ghazāla<sup>4</sup> is her only collection of short stories. Most of them are about the sort of love which features in Lutfiyya al-Qabā'ilī's stories, a puritanical and platonic love that should lead to marriage.

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1. Al-Qabā'ilī, Amānī Mu<sup>C</sup>allaba, p.58.

2. Mardiyya al-Na<sup>CC</sup>ās, Shay' min al-Dif'a, (Tripoli 1972).

3. Al-Na<sup>CC</sup>ās, al-Mazrūf al-Azraq, (Tripoli 1972).

4. Al-Na<sup>CC</sup>ās, Ghazāla, (Tripoli 1976).



The eponymous heroine of "Munā"<sup>1</sup> loves Mahmūd who works in a shop near her house. It is a silent love, for she only sees him when she passes by the shop as she goes in and out of her house. Apart from customary greetings they never speak to each other. One day she is worried when she does not see him at his post. Her anxiety is compounded by the fact that she cannot ask after Mahmūd. The reader is no doubt justified in wondering whether our heroine is not somewhat hysterical, for no matter how passionately she may love him, her common sense would surely have allowed for the fact that Mahmūd is not a statue, and that as a human being, he is bound to move from his post. The reader would have wanted a day or two, or a week, before allowing emotions to run high. The conflict within her was whether she should tell her mother of the reason for her anxiety or not; she feels that her mother will misinterpret her emotions, and there is nobody she can turn to except for Ahmad, her brother. She is certain that he will understand.

In another story entitled "Ṣaḥwat al-Damīr"<sup>2</sup> (The Awakening of the Conscience), the heroine, also called Munā, dreams of getting married to Muḥammad, who in turn wants to marry her and asks for her hand. Her mother insists that he should marry her younger sister, a highly unlikely situation. This obstacle is overcome when the sister recognises Munā's love for Muḥammad and convinces her mother to approve of the marriage.

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1. Al-Na<sup>CC</sup>ās, "Muna", Ghazāla, p.11.

2. Al-Na<sup>CC</sup>ās, "Ṣaḥwat al-Dhamīr", Ghazāla, p.65.



In "Wa Taghallaba al-<sup>C</sup>Aql"<sup>1</sup> (Reason Triumphs), Munā has a sister named Fāṭima, who is in a dilemma, for the man who has deceived her once, and left her for another woman, has now returned and is asking to marry her. She asks Munā to help her reach a decision which it turns out is to avenge her wounded pride by refusing him. There is always Mahmūd, who seems to have sprung from nowhere, offering his love. In "Mīlād Jadīd"<sup>2</sup> (A New Birth) Muna is engaged to a cousin who goes abroad for higher education. Although he gets married to another girl while abroad, his engagement to Munā remains valid and the family wish to go ahead with the marriage. But she refuses and finds support from her brother.

In "Shay' Lahu Ma<sup>C</sup>nā"<sup>3</sup> (A Meaningful Thing) Munā is in love and is going to marry the man of her dreams. She has also helped in creating an environment free from ignorance by giving lessons to illiterate women. The message of the story is that we can only create a healthy society by liberating the minds from the grip of ignorance.

These stories are characterised by repetitive situations with repetitive and static female characters, named Munā, all craving for marriage. Only when she goes out of the world of adolescent girls dreaming of marriage do her short stories become a little better as in

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1. Al-Na<sup>CC</sup>ās, "Wa Taghallaba al-<sup>C</sup>Aql", Ghazāla, p.80.

2. Al-Na<sup>CC</sup>ās, "Mīlād Jadīd", Ghazāla, p.73.

3. Al-Na<sup>CC</sup>ās, "Shay' Lahu Ma<sup>C</sup>nā", Ghazāla, p.7.

a moving story called "Amal Lā Yamūt"<sup>1</sup> (The Hope that Doesn't Die), in which she offers some insights into a woman's emotions when attending her dying mother. She reveals her disgust for her cruel father, for it was the way he treated her mother that led to her death. After giving him nine children he had left her to marry a new wife.

Emotions also run high in "Wadā<sup>c</sup> Ma<sup>c</sup>a al-Daw'"<sup>2</sup> (Farewell at Daylight) where the woman is divorced and the husband is to be given the custody of the children. The woman's sister is also a divorcee who is proscribed from marrying again for fifteen years because she had refused to return to her previous husband. The story is told in great anguish and distress, lamenting the fate of tender women at the hands of cruel men.

In all Mardīyya al-Na<sup>cc</sup>ās' stories, as indeed in most of those by Luṭfiyya al-Qabā'ilī, the mention of sex never occurs, even in highly emotional love scenes. Also in common, is the concept that marriage is always the ultimate aim of every woman, there being none who dares to entertain any dreams that surpass marriage. Then again, marriage is highly romanticized in these stories, even when it collapses where it is always due to some external factor, either pressure from the husband's family or infertility on the part of the woman. Female characters are also idealised being loyal, faithful and faultless wives and

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1. Al-Na<sup>cc</sup>ās, "Amal Lā Yamūt", Ghazāla, p.5.

2. Al-Na<sup>cc</sup>ās, "Wadā<sup>c</sup> Ma<sup>c</sup>a al-Daw'", Ghazāla, p.36.

sweethearts. In al-Na<sup>CC-</sup>ās's stories people's minds are easily swayed and their attitudes change at the utterance of a word of advice, as if the writer wishes to ignore all the complexities of the human mind. Both women writers, and indeed, most writers of the romantic tendency in general have kept faith with their middle class values, standards and ideals. They may question certain aspects of these values, they may demand reforms, but they do not challenge the bases of their society.

The romantic story has now become of marginal interest, giving way to more sophisticated and refined approaches. The romanticists receive recognition as writers, and rightly so, especially those of the earlier period, as they were pioneering a new field of literature. And as pioneers they will always be remembered for their contribution to the development of the Libyan short story. As for the new generation of writers, recognition cannot be easily obtained merely on the merits of writing a sentimental story. Now that the Libyan short story has covered new ground and gained a new sophistication and finesse in its artistic presentation, stories with heavy sentimental colouring will not rate highly in this new era.



## Chapter Five

### THE TELL-A-TALE APPROACH

ZA<sup>C</sup>ĪMA SULAYMĀN AL-BĀRŪNI - SĀDIQ AL-NAYHŪM -  
KHALĪFA AL-FĀKHIRI - RIDWĀN ABŪ SHUWAYSHA -  
MUHAMMAD AL-MISALLĀTI - <sup>C</sup>ALĪ MUSTAFĀ AL-MISRĀTI

popular literature

There is a body of opinion which views the Libyan short story as a natural descendant of the oral tradition. Kāmil al-Maqhūr, a Libyan critic and short story writer, believes that the roots of today's short story in Libya can be found in the folklore tradition.<sup>1</sup> This opinion may well be based on the phenomenon that the short narrative in Libya, as indeed in many Arab countries, was the dominant form of popular literature. It is therefore not surprising to see some short story writers following the path of ~~oral tradition~~ <sup>popular literature</sup>, attracted by its ease and care-free formula, and avoiding the restraints and demands of modern criteria for the short story. We can divide the stories that fall into this category into three types:

(1) Stories that are written by writers who deliberately and consciously wish not to conform to the rules and techniques of the modern short story because they find them restrictive, the form of the tale being more suitable for their sensibilities; they usually prefer to indicate this in the title page of their books by referring to them as "Tales" as in the case of Ridwān Abū Shuwaysha.<sup>2</sup>

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1. See the introduction by Kāmil al-Maqhūr to al-Bahr Lā Mā'fih by Ahmad Ibrāhīm al-Faqīh (Tripoli 1966), p.iii.

2. See below pp.153-160

(2) Stories that aspire to creating a modern mythology, if it may be so called; that is to say, the writers usually try to evoke a world of legend with all its fantasies and supernatural phenomena and apply it to contemporary situations. The stories of Sādiq al-Nayhūm are of this type.<sup>1</sup>

(3) Stories written by writers who are subconsciously applying the folk-tale formula while all the time intending to write a modern short story, as in the case of <sup>C</sup>Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrāṭī.<sup>2</sup>

Among the first books of short stories to be published in Libya<sup>3</sup> was a book entitled al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qawmī<sup>3</sup> (National Story-Telling); it was published in 1958, and included stories that had appeared in journals since 1953. What is remarkable about this collection of stories is that they were written by a woman in the days when a Libyan woman could hardly dream of participating in any form of public life, let alone in the literary field. Za<sup>C</sup>īma al-Bārūnī, the authoress of this book, is a special case, for she had the good fortune to be the daughter of Sulaymān al-Bārūnī, one of the leading personalities of the popular resistance against the Italian occupation, and had travelled widely with him and was thus able to attend Arabic schools. On her return to the country she established the Libyan Women's

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1. See below pp.141-147

2. See below pp.165-176

3. Za<sup>C</sup>īma Sulaymān al-Bārūnī, al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qawmī (Cairo 1958).



Association to cater for the welfare of women by providing educational facilities for them. When writing these stories, she was not aspiring to writing artistic short stories or contributing to the development of this literary genre; to her, these were merely a vehicle by which she could continue her educational mission by presenting historical stories depicting the past history of Libya, its struggles, customs and traditions. In her preface to this book she explains what she sets out to do:

"It was to glorify nationalism and to introduce the new generations to the history of their ancestors and to give a genuine picture of the country."<sup>1</sup>

In doing so, she follows the oral tradition, creating educational and didactic stories illustrating the life of the people in her country, attributing miracles to its holy men and women, bestowing heroism on the leaders of its struggle, and interfering here and there to pass moral judgement or comment, but always full of praise for the people of this land and their self-sacrifice, their devotion, their generosity and martyrdom. Sometimes she takes her material directly from the popular imagination, writing the story as it is told by the people, as in her first story "Qudsiyyat al-Umūma"<sup>2</sup> (The Holiness of Motherhood), where she tells the story of an elderly woman who had dedicated her life to her child after the death of her husband, working and toiling until he becomes a married man. Once she is hurt by his ingratitude,

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1. Ibid., p.7.

2. Al-Bārūnī, "Qudsiyyat al-Umūma, al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qawmī", p.9.

and leaves his house accompanied by her grandson, choosing to live on her own in a deserted place where there is no water. When she feels thirsty a spring appears from beneath her feet. People recognise her holiness and start to visit her, bringing with them their sick to be cured by her blessings and spiritual power.

In another story called "al-Rihla al-Qāsiya"<sup>1</sup> (The Hard Journey), the fantasy world of the folk-tale is evoked and given full rein. In this story she takes us to visit the kingdom of the Jinn in the Libyan desert, portraying a vivid picture of their world and way of life. She also takes us to the world of the mermaids in the sea and their father the king. She does not forget to remind us that the religion of both kingdoms was Islam.

In "al-Karāma al-Haqqā"<sup>2</sup> (The True Pride), she recalls the time of the Libyan struggle against the Italians. Following the legacy of the folk-tale tradition, she depicts more than one episode relating to that period, the mujāhidīn camps, their battles, and the holy man who appeared at one of their meetings to bless them and then disappeared mysteriously. She ends her story with the emigration of one of their leaders, a clear reference to her own father. The period of the struggle is also featured in another story called "Bint al-Hādīra"<sup>3</sup> (The City Woman), to bring out the contrast between

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1. Al-Bārūnī, "al-Rihla al-Qāsiya", al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qawmī, p.75.

2. Al-Bārūnī, "al-Karāma al-Haqqā", al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qawmī, p.24.

3. Al-Bārūnī, "Bint al-Hādīra", al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qawmī, p.102.



life in Libya before and after the Italian invasion. She chooses a wealthy Tripolitanian family and describes its joys and celebrations and happy atmosphere. There then comes the Italian invasion, inflicting death and suffering on the people of the land, and she depicts in great detail the sacrifices made by this family for their country.

In her stories "al-Murū'a"<sup>1</sup> (Generosity), "Fazzān al-Ba<sup>c</sup>īda"<sup>2</sup> (The Far-Away Fazzan) and "al-Rabī<sup>c</sup> fī al-Ḥamāda"<sup>3</sup> (Spring in Ḥamāda), she refers to life during the second Ottoman period (1835-1911) sometimes indicating the year. She draws a happy picture of popular life, giving an account of the social habits and customs, referring in one of the stories to the Turkish Wali, Rajab Pasha, and his kind nature.<sup>4</sup> She describes in one of these stories a Turkish exile who having once lived a few months among the Libyan people decides to stay in the country even after being pardoned and allowed to return to Istanbul.<sup>5</sup> She generally looks favourably on Ottoman rule in Libya. Some other stories go as far back as Libya before Islam,<sup>6</sup> or to the period of the Arab conquest of the country.<sup>7</sup>

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1. Al-Bārūnī, "al-Murū'a", al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qawmī, p.85.

2. Al-Bārūnī, "Fazzān al-Ba<sup>c</sup>īda", al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qawmī, p.92.

3. Al-Bārūnī, "al-Rabī<sup>c</sup> fī al-Ḥamāda", al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qawmī, p.50.

4. Al-Bārūnī, al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qawmī, p.89.

5. Ibid., p.92.

6. Ibid., p.36.

7. Ibid., p.43.



Although the stories of Za<sup>c</sup>īma al-Bārūnī claim no adherence to the artistic short story, they remain in the words of a Libyan critic, "a landmark in the history of the short story in Libya".<sup>1</sup>

While Za<sup>c</sup>īma al-Bārūnī knew that she was writing stories that belong to the pre-modern short story form, Ṣādiq al-Nayhūm's stories were written in accordance with modern concepts. While al-Bārūnī was unaware of, or at least not concerned with, new forms of literature as she was occupied with the national cause in a time when the country was just emerging from a long period of colonial rule, and trying to maintain its independence, al-Nayhūm belongs to another generation, with different convictions and concerns. He is a leading essayist, and literary critic, very much aware of the modern and contemporary schools of thought in literature. While al-Bārūnī wrote her stories as an educationalist serving in the education of the new Libyan generation, al-Nayhūm wrote his as a writer in the pursuit of his profession. He does not write to preach or educate, he writes his stories to display his passion for the fantastic and eccentric, deriving his themes and characters from those of the oral tradition, using them to reflect on contemporary life. He creates bizarre situations, evoking the legendary world of popular fiction and applying a modern method in rewriting them. He does not pay undue attention to plot or characterization, but still demonstrates a powerful

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1. Fawzī al-Bishtī, "al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qawmī Ihda Bidāyāt al-Qiṣṣa al-Qaṣīra fī Lībiyā", al-Fuṣūl al-Arba<sup>c</sup>a (Tripoli), July 1981, p.132.

skill in creating an authentic atmosphere using a humorous and poetic style to produce highly entertaining stories with elegance and stylization.

In 1972 he published a book containing seven of his tales, which he curiously entitled 'Min Qisas al-Atfāl'<sup>1</sup> (Some Children's Stories), for they are neither fit for children nor about children. His affinity with the oral tradition is most evident in the first tale in this book, which is entitled "<sup>c</sup>An Qūt al-<sup>c</sup>Iyāl"<sup>2</sup> (Of the Provision for Children), where he depicts the atmosphere of a café that has a public story teller narrating the Sīrat Banī Hilāl, describing the impact the story teller makes on his audience when they become emotionally involved with the fantasy world of the story; but then the fighting is transformed from the fantasy to the real world of the café, when a fight breaks out, initially between a black man supporting Abū Zayd al-Hilālī and a beggar supporting his enemy al-Zinātī Khalīfa. Al-Nayhūm adopts a sarcastic tone while telling the story and maintains a cynical attitude towards the audience who find an escape in this sort of entertainment, something to compensate for their dull, monotonous life and their poor living conditions. So immersed are they in these fantasies that one of them even casts himself in the role of Abū Zayd impersonating him in real life.

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1. Sādiq al-Nayhūm, Min Qisas al-Atfāl (Benghazi 1972).

2. Al-Nayhūm, "<sup>c</sup>An Qūt al-<sup>c</sup>Iyāl", Min Qisas al-Atfāl, p.81.



In "<sup>C</sup>An Ghaltāt Juhā"<sup>1</sup> (Of Juhā's Mistake), al-Nayhūm draws on the old heritage concerning the folklore character Juhā. But in this tale he creates two Juhās: the Juhā of the East comes from Baghdad to Benghazi to challenge the Juhā of the West, and plays on the rivalry between the two, having them engage in a battle of wits, using them as masks for contemporary personalities. Eventually the cunning of the Western Juhā outwits the Eastern Juhā.

His masterly use of irony and satire are powerfully displayed in these stories, and "<sup>C</sup>An al-<sup>C</sup>Azm wa-Rāqid al-Rīh"<sup>2</sup> (Of the Bone and the Helpless) serves as a very good example in this respect. It is a humorous tale which tells how the women of Benghazi overpower the devil himself. This is how the devil comes to learn the bitter fact:

"He was standing at his usual place in front of the gates of Hell counting the new victims who had just arrived from the material world. He was laughing loudly and wagging his ugly hairless tail shouting: 'This is the output of one day. Look here, you Guardian of Heaven, I have collected all this herd by myself in one day. I only need throw my net into the world to bring it back full of pigs.'"<sup>3</sup>

All the people around him were shouting and screaming except for one man from Benghazi who will not acknowledge that it is the devil

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1. Al-Nayhūm, "<sup>C</sup>An Ghaltāt Juhā", Min Qisas al-Atfāl, p.65.

2. Al-Nayhūm, "<sup>C</sup>An al-<sup>C</sup>Azm wa Rāqid al-Rīh", Min Qisas al-Atfāl, p.51.

3. Ibid., p.51.



who had brought him there. His arrival in Hell was the achievement of his wife and the devil is insulted at this:

"He picked up his walking stick and closed his house in Hell lest burglars steal the furniture, and rushed away looking for the city of Benghazi, hoping to find out the truth for himself. He found the city, it was only five miles away from Hell."<sup>1</sup>

We then begin to observe the way that women treat their men.

The wife from Benghazi was at the time inducing her husband to steal a lamb to slaughter during the coming Bayram. The writer does not forget to joke about the popular belief that the lamb sacrificed in this world will help them pass into the next:

"Go and steal our neighbours lamb 'cause I can't stand the idea of seeing his lame wife riding that huge lamb [passing over the ṣirāṭ] on her way to heaven, with me walking the whole way. Yes, go right now, unless you want to make me a laughing stock on Judgement Day."<sup>2</sup>

Again Sādiq al-Nayhūm is wearing a legendary mask to ridicule the women of his hometown, Benghazi.

Sometimes he wears his disguises to serve some political purpose, a good example of this being "<sup>c</sup>An Aḥsan Liṣṣ fī al-Mamlaka"<sup>3</sup> (Of the Best Thief in the Kingdom). He attributes the story to the old

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1. Ibid., p.54.

2. Ibid., p.56.

3. Al-Nayhūm, "<sup>c</sup>An Aḥsan Liṣṣ fī al-Mamlaka", Min Qisas al-Atfāl, p.26.

woman of Benghazi, and he sets out to create an atmosphere similar to that of the Thousand and One Nights. When the chief thief decides to retire to Mecca to wash away his sins, his post is to go to the thief who can prove himself the best thief in town by stealing the jewel from the Sultan's turban. In a series of incidents and coincidences, we find out that the Sultan himself is the best thief in the Kingdom.

In "<sup>C</sup>An al-Nasr al-Sihri al-Abyad"<sup>1</sup> (Of the White Magical Eagle), al-Nayhūm again tries to copy the public imagination in invoking the world of magic. The poor Quranic schoolteacher, who is always seen "chasing the lice on his shirt", dedicates his life to obtaining the power of magic by which he may find the secret treasure that he has read about in ancient books. The writer takes us on a journey with his character's fantasies, committing crimes, obtaining the magical power, solving the riddle of the treasure, and turning into a mule. At a later stage the fantasy evaporates and the teacher returns to his poverty and his dull, monotonous life.

"<sup>C</sup>An Bā'i<sup>C</sup> al-Milh al-Ṭayyib al-Qalb"<sup>2</sup> (Of the Good-hearted Salt-seller) stands out as the best story in this collection. The good-hearted black man, who toils all day long supplying salt to his town, is caught up in a duel with a Jinnī who appears at the salt pan

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1. Al-Nayhūm, "<sup>C</sup>An al-Nasr al-Sihri al-Abyad", Min Qisas al-Atfal, p.41.

2. Al-Nayhūm, "<sup>C</sup>An Bā'i<sup>C</sup> al-Milh al-Ṭayyib al-Qalb", Min Qisas al-Atfal, p.17.

and offers to wrestle him, a situation from which the man could find no escape but to take up the challenge and engage in a fight with this supernatural creature. The Jinnī introduced here as a metaphor for this man's struggle for survival. As the good-hearted black man wins the battle, the Jinnī offers to reward him, and in admiration for the salt-seller's courage and bravery he fills his bags with diamonds instead of salt. Tired and exhausted, the black man goes home to sleep, while his wife takes the donkey that was loaded with the diamonds, on her daily rounds, selling them as salt. Al-Nayhūm glorifies man's journey through life and his triumph against overwhelming odds, but cannot disguise his cynical view of life, even at a precious moment like this.

In these tales the writer combines realism with symbolism, employing public symbols, and borrowing popular fictional characters and situations. He draws on Arabic folktales in general, to build a world where hopes are never fulfilled, man is unceasingly chased by legendary beasts and where life becomes a series of unpleasant and meaningless events. Through this he gives the impression that there is a basic defect in this world, or indeed in human beings, which render them the victims of their own greed, conceit and self-deception.

Despite his humour and wit, his world is haunted by fear and terror. Violence is an essential part of every tale, be it the bloody clash between the black man and the blind beggar in



"<sup>C</sup>An Qūt al-<sup>C</sup>Iyāl"<sup>1</sup> or the torture and persecution in "<sup>C</sup>An Ghaltāt Juhā".<sup>2</sup> It is the slaughter of a man in "<sup>C</sup>An al-<sup>C</sup>Azm wa Rāqid al-Rīh",<sup>3</sup> and the teacher slaying his pupil in "<sup>C</sup>An al-Nasr al-Sihrī al-Abyad";<sup>4</sup> it is the Jinnī crushing the bones of the salt-seller in "<sup>C</sup>An Bā'i<sup>C</sup> al-Milḥ al-Ṭayyib al-Qalb"<sup>5</sup> and the destruction of a city and the demise of all its inhabitants in "<sup>C</sup>An Marākib al-Sultān".<sup>6</sup>

Although Sādiq al-Nayhūm's major occupation is with essays and novels, this book of tales, with their concern for universal human conditions, offers a colourful contribution to short fiction in modern Libyan literature.

Among those who choose deliberately to write tales rather than short stories is Khalīfa al-Fākhirī, who entitled his collection of essays and tales Mawsim al-Hikāyat<sup>7</sup> (The Season of Tales), in which he endeavours to recapture past experiences and adventures, evoking memories of childhood, of people, places and events from his travels. He relates his tales in an easy, lucid style and a chatty,

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1. Al-Nayhūm, Min Qisas al-Atfāl, p.81.

2. Ibid., p.65.

3. Ibid., p.51.

4. Ibid., p.41.

5. Ibid., p.17.

6. Ibid., p.5.

7. Khalīfa al-Fākhirī, Mawsim al-Hikāyat, (Benghazi 1974).

friendly manner. None of the rules of the modern short story are observed; he does not make this his concern, for he only wants to communicate, and he succeeds, as one critic has noted:

"You feel that he addresses you as a friend, in an easy flowing style, short sentences, using the quickest way to make his point."<sup>1</sup>

In the opening pages of his book, he states what he sets out to do:

"When the shiver comes to convulse your body, and you feel the burden of loneliness, then and then only begins the season of tales. Yes, the season of tales.

Tonight I want to tell you tales, wherever you are and whoever you are. I have told these tales to myself many a night, and now I feel somehow that I am addressing myself again, yet there is absolutely no difference. Therefore try to listen to the heartbeat of room No.211, there might be something worth listening to."<sup>2</sup>

From the very beginning we are made to feel that his tales and articles are the products of loneliness which he is writing in the solitude of a hotel room, and that the writer is at the same time assuming the role of the public story teller to entertain us and while away our hours of boredom.

In his defiance of boredom and loneliness he starts recounting little episodes, comments, and memories in the first article of his

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1. Sulaymān Kishlāf, Kitābāt Lībiyya, (Tripoli 1977), p.89.

2. Al-Fākhirī, Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.8.

book, putting them under one title, the only connection between them being the narrator himself, as they present his reflections, and his state of mind at the moment of writing. In the process of doing so he quotes Ernest Hemingway in The Old Man and the Sea, when describing the old man's loneliness at sea. Echoes of Hemingway are scattered throughout his tales, especially references from the above mentioned novel. Al-Fākhirī's characters are usually in the habit of talking to themselves and recollecting their dreams of the night before. Like Hemingway's old man, his characters are also worried when they have not dreamt the night before. Like Hemingway too, he picks his characters from cafés, bars and from his travels. In style too, he is influenced by Hemingway, imitating his short sentences and phrases, but he fails to match Hemingway's technique, style and the wider implications of the events he depicts.

The anecdote is almost an integral part of all his tales. Indeed it can be said that some of these tales are no more than anecdotes as in the title story "Mawsim al-Hikāyāt" which consists of an unconnected group of short articles and tales, the title of which is given to the collection in which it forms the first part. The man in the fifth tale of "Mawsim al-Hikāyāt"<sup>1</sup> was exiled from the city to a remote village in the desert as a punishment for his political activities, and the village fortuitously turned out to be his own village. The

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1. Al-Fākhirī, Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.13.



man in the sixth tale<sup>1</sup> who rides his bike every day across the border, is searched and then allowed to pass; but he happens to be smuggling bicycles. There is also the man who goes to a male charm-maker, to have a charm by which he can win the heart of a beautiful young woman. He later finds out that the charm-maker has gone to the woman himself and married her.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the anecdote is inserted in a longer tale as in "Ghurba"<sup>3</sup> (Estrangement) when the girl who goes to school in a horse-drawn coach, with all the airs of a favourite daughter of a rich father, turns out, instead, to be the daughter of the poor coachman. The function of this anecdote is to give some humour to a very tense and fraught situation, for the prevailing mood in al-Fākhirī's tales is not cheerfulness and gaiety, but, as his anecdotes may suggest, it is of gloom and helplessness. Even his journeys are self-searching: "The longest journey is the journey within ourselves."<sup>4</sup>

Al-Fākhirī has a strong urge to explain himself in autobiographical tales, narrating in the first person, and even the people he encounters serve, in most cases, as mirrors, in which he reflects his own perceptions and thoughts. Part of the frustration he feels is that of the artist in a backward society, the predicament of those who

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1. Al-Fākhirī, Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.13.

2. Al-Fākhirī, Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.20.

3. Al-Fākhirī, "Ghurba", Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.95.

4. Al-Fākhirī, "Sanawāt al-<sup>c</sup>Umr al-Ṣadi'a", Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.251.

are more advanced and progressive in their outlook than the people around them, and the misunderstandings that arise from this:

"When their eyes surveyed your words, they said that you are a mere drunkard, an atheist, and an agent, and that you only write for the sake of a handful of filthy piastres.

They have nothing else to say.

For them you provide a good topic at which they breathe their curses, till they make you feel that you are inside a blazing furnace. Before they had finished reading your words they had thrown the newspaper on the pavement, and then a dog came, cautiously sniffed at it, urinated on it and left."<sup>1</sup>

When faced with a difficult situation, he resorts to dreaming, taking refuge in his power of imagination, as when the narrator is imprisoned for political activities in "Fikhākh <sup>C</sup>alā Tūl al-Ṭarīq"<sup>2</sup> (Traps Along the Way). There he finds comfort in the world of his dreams. He also uses this gift when the narrator is faced with the grim prospect of being caught travelling with no proper documents in "Jisr Fawq al-Miyāh al-<sup>C</sup>Akira"<sup>3</sup> (A Bridge Over Muddy Waters). He also uses dreaming as a means of escape in "Layālī Shahrāzād"<sup>4</sup> (The Nights of Scheherezade) where he evokes the fantasy world

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1. Al-Fākhirī, "<sup>C</sup>Uyūn al-Kilāb al-Mayyita", Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.198.

2. Al-Fākhirī, "Fikhākh <sup>C</sup>alā Tūl al-Ṭarīq", Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.304.

3. Al-Fākhirī, "Jisr Fawq al-Miyāh al-<sup>C</sup>Akira" Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.313.

4. Al-Fākhirī, "Layālī Shahrāzād", Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.165.



of The Thousand and One Nights to highlight the living conditions of his character. The prince in Scheherezade's fantasy finds the most beautiful girl in the forest, but a few moments later she turns into a man-eating ghoul, while the narrator dreams of the beauty and charm of the girl he is going to marry only to find out on his wedding night that she is deprived of any beauty and her face looks like a "bundle of parsley". The habit of introducing a sub-story within the main story can be found in most of al-Fākhirī's tales, the recurring theme of these sub-stories being always related to sexual matters. The eponymous character in "Ta<sup>c</sup>wīda"<sup>1</sup> belongs to the sub-story, the main plot opening with the lady administrator of a school of English in England telling the narrator of her dismay at the behaviour of youngsters coming from his country and their unsophisticated approach to women. As a means of explaining their sexual deprivation he tells the story of Tāwīda, an elderly homosexual in Benghazi who offers himself to the adolescent boys of the city for two piasters. Sex also features in "al-Hazīma"<sup>2</sup> (The Defeat), the sub-theme in this tale concerning a loose woman who, whenever her husband is away working in the oil fields, makes assignations with a van driver with whom she has sexual intercourse in his van which is usually parked opposite the window of the narrator's room. The

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1. Al-Fākhirī, "Ta<sup>c</sup>wīda", Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.293.

2. Al-Fākhirī, "al-Hazīma", Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.69.



narrator makes a habit of watching them, suppressing his own sexual urge. In "al-<sup>c</sup>Adhāb"<sup>1</sup> (The Suffering) the decent people in the neighbourhood are offended by the conduct of a wayward woman who takes up residence in their street. By day they condemn her and organise petitions against her, but by night the same so called decent people sneak under cover of darkness to the house of the same woman requesting an hour of pleasure.

Ridwān Abū Shuwaysha is a writer of a different category, for most of his tales are written with great compactness and precision. While Khalīfa al-Fākhirī is set on explaining himself, wandering freely with his thoughts and ideas, Abū Shuwaysha derives his strength from the power of his observation. His inclination to write the tale rather than the artistic short story stems from his belief that the "short story in Arab literature has been imported together with Nescafé and Carnation milk".<sup>2</sup> While the roots of the tale, as he sees them, are "grounded in our grandmothers' tales". Translations of his tales into English appeared in a book entitled The King of the Dead and Other Libyan Tales. In the title story he depicts a world of fear and horror, the story taking place in the kingdom of the dumb and

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1. Al-Fākhirī, "al-<sup>c</sup>Adhāb", Mawsim al-Hikāyāt, p.37.

2. Redwan Abushwasha, The King of the Dead and Other Libyan Tales, translated by the author, Orla Woods Abushwasha and Macdara Woods (London 1977), on the back of the dust jacket.

ignorant where the one-horned creature eats the tongue of anyone who utters the greeting "peace on you".<sup>1</sup> This renders all the people of the kingdom frightened and insecure. The story is meant to serve as a warning to those who submit to oppression and fail to resist dictatorial government, and for this reason he dedicates the story to "the Chilean prisoners" whom he believes to have set an example for all of us. Insecure people are depicted in most of his stories. In the case of the centre character of "First Day of Awakening after Six Days of Death",<sup>2</sup> his insecurity stems from his involvement in a troubled country as a correspondent in Belfast. He falls victim to a nervous breakdown, and disaster is only averted by the grace of his parents' faith:

"He only lived through this because the good soul of his father was minding him and the prayers of his mother by the black stone of Mecca. Without this he was dead."<sup>3</sup>

The child in "Eat Dates, Drink Milk"<sup>4</sup> was innocently holding a poisonous snake asking it to share his food insisting that it should eat dates and drink milk. The snake finally suffocated. The disaster was averted by chance but the child's mother considered the

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1. Abushwasha, "The King of the Dead", The King of the Dead, p.44.

2. Abushwasha, "First Day of Awakening After Six Days of Death",  
The King of the Dead, p.19.

3. Ibid., p.20.

4. Abushwasha, "Eat Dates, Drink Milk", The King of the Dead, p.21.

act to be a miracle performed by an invisible holy man who had rushed to save him. Faith is the defence of these people against a hostile and insecure environment.

The boy in "Fields of Anger"<sup>1</sup> goes to steal a few oranges from a farm owned by an Italian settler. While trying to escape, the boy's robe is caught in a wire fence and he is thus exposed to the ridicule of the farmworkers. As a person becomes matured by experience and age, the gap between him and his society and the world around him widens, providing another source of anxiety and insecurity:

"The life was changed around him, and he himself had changed with no semblance of similarity between him and the world."<sup>2</sup>

The dilemma remains as great as ever with those who live in a rapidly changing society, even when the change in the environment meant an improvement in living conditions, as in the case of the elderly people in the valley who were

"more and more puzzled every day; what has happened to the valley? The old men and women stare silently at the tractors that are clearing land for the new farms".<sup>3</sup>

Although the valley now blooms the narrator of the tale decides to leave it once more to work as a cook in a restaurant in Munich.

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1. Abushwasha, "Fields of Anger", The King of the Dead, p.46.

2. Abushwasha, "The First Day of Awakening after Six Days of Death", The King of the Dead, p.20.

3. Abushwasha, "The Valley Blooms in September", The King of the Dead, p.23.



The same happens with the central character in "Just Wait"<sup>1</sup> who remembers his own difficult childhood when he sees the happy children of the new society: "The whole vista brought a sudden strange idea to his mind that he would die by suicide".<sup>2</sup>

False hopes are raised, followed by the usual disappointment and sense of loss, in "The Fool"<sup>3</sup> when the narrator's family is overwhelmed by joy at the visit of a holy man who promises to accept their child into his Quranic School; they offer him a meal and a place to stay the night, only to find out the next morning, that he has left, taking with him their savings and their only camel. Their helplessness and their inability to do anything is well illustrated by the way the old woman reacts: she raises her hand to the sky and asks God to punish the thief with smallpox.

In "The Treasure"<sup>4</sup> the plough becomes stuck while cultivating the land; a box is found buried beneath the soil, and great expectations are raised only to be dashed when it is found that the box contains only a skeleton.

Some of these tales fail to achieve any artistic merit, remaining merely jokes and anecdotes, as is the case with "The Treasure" and "The Walkie-Talkie Hedgehog".<sup>5</sup> His style also fails him when he

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1. Abushwsha, "Just Wait", The King of the Dead, p.39.

2. Ibid., p.40.

3. Abushwsha, "The Fool", The King of the Dead, p.52.

4. Abushwsha, "The Treasure", The King of the Dead, p.55.

5. Abushwsha, "The Walkie-Talkie Hedgehog", The King of the Dead, p.37.

attempts to write tales depicting the Libyan struggle against the Italians. Here he becomes too direct, too sentimental, passing comments and remarks that are not intelligent enough to justify the writers interference, let alone the distraction it causes to the narration:

"Without the revolution, Marie-Antionette, Caligula, Hitler and Mussolini would have lived till now. Without the holy human struggle the symbols of these black fascists would be flying over the United Nations Building."<sup>1</sup>

or

"The thing that makes me come back to my homeland is great love, this great love is the strands of feelings which enable me to breathe."<sup>2</sup>

or

"To love your country from afar is something mysterious, there is something sacred in this love, so I have become an addict by choice."<sup>3</sup>

The emotionally exaggerated language is evident in tales such as "The Cord of Sand"<sup>4</sup> and "Antonio",<sup>5</sup> the first being merely an exaggerated account of the bravery of the narrator's grandfather in

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1. Abushwasha, The King of the Dead, p.59.

2. Abushwasha, The King of the Dead, p.24.

3. Abushwasha, The King of the Dead, p.25.

4. Abushwasha, "The Cord of Sand", The King of the Dead, p.26.

5. Abushwasha, "Antonio", The King of the Dead, p.42.

the war, the second merely a report relating, in a somewhat naive language, the life story of an Italian settler who had been brought by Mussolini and had been asked to leave the country after the revolution of 1969.

Yet Abū Shuwaysha proves that he is well capable of mastering the situation in a story entitled "A Blind Arab in a London Pub", which can serve as a good example of his power of observation, compactness, and precision, where in about 200 words he tells us the tragic life of an Arab. As this is an extremely short tale, of some merit, it is appropriate to quote it here in its entirety:

"He entered the pub accompanied by a tall policeman, the policeman asked the barmaid to be kind to him and he left. The man was blind: and from the Arabian Gulf, as I knew from the traditional clothes he wore, and of a dark complexion. He started gulping Guinness and eating chicken soup. The pint was finished in a minute and he sipped the hot soup as if it were cold water until it was gone. He did the same thing with the second pint of Guinness and bowl of soup, then he explained with his hands and feet and walking stick that he wanted a double whiskey and five chicken sandwiches, all of which he finished in a few seconds. Then he explained with his hands and his feet, his walking stick and his poor English that he wanted to go back to Guinness and chicken soup again and he groped his way to a chair and started to weep.

This upset me, as I respect the tears of men. Suddenly he smashed his pint of Guinness on the floor and swept his soup aside. I decided to leave as this behaviour disturbed me. As I left I heard him muttering, 'God curse chickens, God curse chickens'.



A few days later, when I went back to the same pub, I learned that chickens had pecked his eyes out when he was a child."<sup>1</sup>

At a first glance the tale has the appearance of a joke or an anecdote, but when examined carefully we see how it presents a real comment on human existence; Abushwasha's vision, perception and craftsmanship turns the anecdote into a work of art. <sup>it is a</sup> Pathetic situation, yet the tale is conveyed with a great discipline and objectivity, no word of sympathy is expressed except for the narrator's respect for the tears of men, this comment was also necessary, it serves three aims, firstly it allows the narrator to make his presence felt, secondly, it reveals something about the nature of the narrator, thirdly, it prepares for the narrator's exit. Timing is an essential factor in the success of this tale. From the first sentence we are made aware of an awkward situation. "He entered the pub accompanied by a tall policeman" and then "The policeman asked the barmaid to be kind to him and left".

With utmost economy the writer starts his exposition, the situation is soon clarified, the man is blind. Information concerning the character is given in the first few sentences. The narrator is telling a story he observed, and it develops with urgency, intensity and speed until it finally reaches the concluding sentences, when the whole situation is illuminated.

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1. Abushwasha, "A Blind Arab in a London Pub", The King of the Dead, pp. 33-34.

Here we meet a different version of the London Arabs. It is not the stereotyped image of the Arab tourist publicized by the western mass media, not that introduced by the official glossy pamphlet of an Arab embassy, it is an Arab presented through art, real, lively and human. This tale, with the multitude of implications it carries, lends itself to varied interpretations, though it is about an Arab, but that can be irrelevant to the main focus of the tale, it is important only in terms of establishing the credibility of the character; beyond that we can consider him a representative of any human situation, where the person unable to see is guided by a policeman who represents the established values, morals, institutions, patterns of behaviour and conventions by which we are expected to abide. The bar serves as a metaphor for this world with its earthly affairs and concerns.

Muhammad al-Misallātī is a younger writer whose narrative prose may be better categorised as sketches rather than tales.<sup>1</sup> In 1977 a

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1. In distinguishing the sketch from the tale, Ian Reid offers this explanation:

"There is a broad initial distinction between writing about conditions and writing about events. On the one hand primary emphasis falls on what some thing, place or person is like, on the other, it falls on what happens. The former, then, is predominately descriptive, while the latter follows a line of action."

He concludes:

"The first of these is a sketch, the second, having an anecdotal core, usually develops into a tale."

See Ian Reid, The Short Story: The Critical Idiom, (London 1977), p.30.

book containing a collection of sketches which had appeared earlier in various journals and periodicals, was published, entitled al-Dajīj<sup>1</sup> (The Noise). The title of the book refers to no particular sketch, it is a suggestive title meant to indicate an idea about the nature of his subject matter. His main purpose in writing these sketches is to pay tribute to the toiling people of his country who in the face of overwhelming odds could still sustain hope and faith in the future. He writes with great compassion, sensitivity and sympathy for his characters, but with moderate skill and proficiency.

"<sup>c</sup>An Hamm al-<sup>c</sup>Umr"<sup>2</sup> (Of the Concerns of a Lifetime), glorifies the endurance and patience of its main character <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Jawwād. However there is nothing significant in terms of analysis, insight or events. It ends in a very superficial way, lamenting the ingratitude of his son who becomes an adult with a secure job while abandoning his parents to their poverty and old age.

The same sentiments are expressed in "al-Zaytūn"<sup>3</sup> (The Olive Trees) where the central character serves as an example of man's triumph over hardship and separation from home. While "Satashruq al-Shams yā Tiflī"<sup>4</sup> (The Sun will Rise My Child) is like a report written by a

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1. Muḥammad al-Misallātī, al-Dajīj, (Libya 1977).

2. Al-Misallātī, "<sup>c</sup>An Hamm al-<sup>c</sup>Umr", al-Dajīj, p.49.

3. Al-Misallātī, "al-Zaytūn", al-Dajīj, p.107.

4. Al-Misallātī, "Satashruq al-Shams yā Tiflī", al-Dajīj, p.13.



social worker explaining the suffering and misfortunes of an elderly woman. These sketches are all told in a compassionate sympathetic manner, and sometimes in an elegant style as in the case of "al-Zaytūn". But the writer, who remains within these limits, is unable to penetrate beneath the surface, nor does he attempt to explore the social factors that contribute to their misfortune; they are all victims of blind fate. Reviewing this book when it first appeared, a Libyan noted:

"Silence engulfs them all. His characters' submission to circumstances, their acceptance of the humiliating reality of life is the beginning and the end in every story. Events in them start like a sandstorm, without any effect. He starts from a vacuum and returns to a vacuum again, unable to sustain himself for long."<sup>1</sup>

Al-Misallātī is more credible when he turns his concern to children who suffer at the hands of ignorant parents and from their backward environment. He draws the attention of his readers to the effects of these factors on the children's development in later years. In "al-Junūn"<sup>2</sup> (Madness) it leads to insanity, when the main character decides, all of a sudden, to break from established patterns of behaviour, throwing off the chains of social pressure with which he has lived since childhood. The same afflicts the central character in "al-Mayyit alladhī lam Yamut"<sup>3</sup> (The Dead Man Who Has Not Died), who

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1. Khalīfa Ḥusayn Muṣṭafā, "al-Khawā' fī al-Dajīj", al-Fuṣūl al-Araba<sup>c</sup> (Tripoli), April 1979, p.293.

2. Al-Misallātī, "al-Junūn", al-Dajīj, p.101.

3. Al-Misallātī, "al-Mayyit alladhī lam Yamut", al-Dajīj, p.41.

grows tired of his inhibited personality and wants to rid himself of it.

The consequences in "al-Intihār"<sup>1</sup> (The Suicide) are even more serious. The harsh treatment and the negative attitude of the family towards their daughter causes her to kill herself. This sentimental sketch is narrated in a graphic descriptive style, with exaggerated action, which serves only as a mouthpiece for the writer's concern about the way parents treat their daughters, expressing his hope for a better society and a better environment. The only one of these sketches to reach the dignity of a short story proper and escape the writer's superficial treatment is entitled "Ḥikāyat Rajul Min al-Qarya"<sup>2</sup> (The Tale of a Man From the Village). Here the writer breaks away from the limitations of the static situations of the sketch, and writes a moving story with a certain degree of subtlety and refinement, in which he depicts a man who lives under a heavy burden of guilt. The story is told in the first person when the writer assumes the role of the witness, who introduces the reader to the world of a lonely old man, who is always seen sitting alone, leaning against the wall, puffing away at his cigarette, silent, distant, unapproachable. Thus the writer begins to arouse the interest of his reader as he goes along. The narrator takes it upon himself to

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1. Al-Misallātī, "al-Intihār", al-Dajīj, p.67.

2. Al-Misallātī, "Ḥikāyat Rajul Min al-Qarya", al-Dajīj, p.25.



unravel the secret of al-Faqīh <sup>c</sup>Uthmān, the lonely old man. As he befriends him he discovers that the man was once a party to a tragic experience. His father was considered a holy man, and when he died, the people of the village immediately assumed that his son had inherited his sanctity and began to treat him accordingly. Being a young man he enjoyed this role and the power and influence that went with it. When he wanted to marry he was able to have the most beautiful and sought-after girl in the village, Zaynab, the daughter of a highly respected family. On the wedding night, however, he finds that he is impotent. Thus the holy man who was expected to perform miracles for others, is unable to perform his duties as a husband. Shocked at the discovery of his own impotence, and frightened at the prospect of his impotency being discovered, he tells a member of her family that he cannot touch her because she is not a virgin. Without questioning the truth of his accusation her brother takes a dagger and kills Zaynab to expunge the shame she has brought upon her family. Seeing the consequences of his hasty action he runs away from the village to a life of seclusion and solitude, living with a heavy sense of shame and guilt, unable to forget the scene of the innocent beautiful young bride murdered on her wedding night.

This, a well-written, well-constructed short story succeeds in capturing the essence of this art and serves as a reflection on human vanity and falsehood, presenting an example of the cruelty of a society guided by blind traditions and inappropriate sense of honour.



This moving story provides enough proof that al-Misallātī is capable of achieving a satisfactory artistic refinement when he takes the art of the short story seriously

<sup>c</sup>Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrātī is a prominent name in modern Libyan culture and politics. Since his return to Tripoli in 1949 he has dedicated his efforts to the national cause of the country. Participating in the political struggle for independence as an activist in the Congress Party, he addressed public meetings and political rallies across the country, and wrote articles for journals. In later years he was a member of the opposition parliamentary group from 1960 to 1965. Throughout this period he has been involved in research and a study of some historical and cultural aspects of Libya and has a large number of books to his credit.<sup>1</sup> Part of his effort was devoted to short story writing, of which he produced four volumes.

Although critics of his stories would recognise their richness in terms of their local flavour, they always play down the artistic merits of these stories. His biographer, Najm al-Dīn al-Kīb, notes that one of al-Miṣrātī's characteristics when writing essays as well as stories, is "digression and deviation".<sup>2</sup> Fawziyya Bāryūn, who studied al-Miṣrātī's early stories, attributes the defects in his stories to a certain lack of dedication:

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1. Until the year 1982, he had produced 28 books covering differing cultural and historical aspects of life in Libya.

2. Najm al-Dīn al-Kīb, <sup>c</sup>Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrātī al-Bāhith wa-al-Adīb, (Tripoli 1973), p.73.

"Al-Misrātī most probably knows what the rules of the artistic short story are, yet he is unable to observe them when he writes, not because he lacks the talent but because of the diversity of his activities and his inability to give his full attention to this art. He displays a lack of attentiveness in his writing, for he seems to write, even his stories, in a hasty manner. He does not appear to work hard at them or to think deeply about them, writing in a leisurely manner at an easy pace, without any attempt at polishing or pruning them, or correcting obvious mistakes in them."<sup>1</sup>

The Egyptian critic Aḥmad <sup>C</sup>Atīyya notes that they are truthful stories, yet:

"Some of the principal features are the external description, the prolonged narration, the repetative rhetorical phrases and the preserved cliches, but they are realistic and truthful stories."<sup>2</sup>

Khalīfa Ḥusayn Muṣṭafā, himself a short story writer, adopts a harsh tone when discussing al-Misrātī's stories, but nevertheless seems to hit the right note when he recognises the tell-a-tale nature of the stories which al-Misrātī writes:

"It is a tale, and not a story, into which he stuffs all that can be packed into a tale: anecdotes, yarns, fables, similies, myths, sentences loaded with parables and similies, sentences

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1. Fawziyya Bāryūn, al-Qiṣṣa al-Qasīra fī Lībiyā, unpublished thesis for M.A. Degree (Cairo University, Faculty of Arts, 1974), p.89.
  2. Aḥmad <sup>C</sup>Atīyya, Fī al-Adab al-Lībī al-Hadīth, (Tripoli 1973), p.61.



which are extravagantly long and repetitive, and all of a sudden, you find that the beginning of the story is something quite different from the last part of it. The writer always has something to justify the happy or tragic ending which he will do his utmost to make more sensational. It is a tale, and in most cases it is not free from preaching."<sup>1</sup>

When judged by the criteria of the short story, al-Misrātī's stories are full of defects. They lack unity and totality of effect. He is always tempted to leave the main subject of the story and to be sidetracked by some irrelevant incident. The moralist in him surfaces from time to time to preach or to comment. The structure is loose and loaded with unnecessary explanation, information and prolonged introductions. As for the language, it is exaggerated and lacks consistency and a sense of purpose. This is all true, yet there is something in his stories which holds the attention of his reader. It is their vividness and richness when describing local customs, traditions, patterns of life, and behaviour. He produces a richly painted canvas full of bright colours, the characteristics of the talented primitive painter. Although the above mentioned critics seemed to have recognised the potential in al-Misrātī's stories, they are forced to dismiss them as primitive when judged in the context of the achievements of the modern short story. But this primitiveness is that of the tradition on which

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1. Khalīfa Ḥusayn Mustafā, "Muqaddimāt fī al-Qiṣṣa al-Lībiyya al-Qaṣīra", al-Thaqāfa al-<sup>c</sup>Arabiyya, (Tripoli) January 1975, p.56.



he draws for his stories. We can only understand al-Misrātī's contribution to short story writing when we examine him in the light of the traditions of the public story teller. One of al-Misrātī's earliest occupations was the study of Libyan folk-lore, and it has remained until today his favourite subject. One of his earliest books was Juhā fī Lībiyā,<sup>1</sup> a study of a particular genre of literature, in which he collected the tales and anecdotes that the Libyans have attributed to the folk character Juhā. He has also collected popular sayings and proverbs in a book entitled al-Mujtama<sup>c</sup> al-Lībī min Khilāl Amthālihi al-Sha<sup>c</sup>biyya<sup>2</sup> (Libyan Society Through its Proverbs) and his latest book is also devoted to this area of study, al-Ta<sup>c</sup>ābīr al-Sha<sup>c</sup>biyya; Dalālāt Nafsiyya wa Ijtimā<sup>c</sup>iyya<sup>3</sup> (Popular Sayings: Social and Psychological Implications). He has also published books about the Libyan popular heroes Khūma and Sa<sup>c</sup>dūn.

It is not surprising, therefore, that his long association with folk-lore and popular literature seems to have left its mark on his contributions to the short story, colouring his style and his narration. Nor is he able to escape the manners of the public entertainer, and seems unable to bring himself to write any form of story other than

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1. Al-Misrātī, Juhā fī Lībiyā, (Tripoli 1958).

2. Al-Misrātī, al-Mujtama<sup>c</sup> al-Lībī min Khilāl Amthālihi al-Sha<sup>c</sup>biyya, 2nd edition (Tripoli 1972).

3. Al-Misrātī, al-Ta<sup>c</sup>ābīr al-Sha<sup>c</sup>biyya: Dalālāt Nafsiyya wa-Ijtimā<sup>c</sup>iyya, (Tripoli 1982).

that kind with which he is most identified, that of the public story teller. This becomes evident even in the choice of his subject matter. While other writers usually look for the implications of an event, al-Misrātī, like the public story teller, opts for excitement of the event itself. In his stories the event becomes the significant factor rather than the implication. When implications exist, they are of secondary importance. The events in his stories, must, therefore, be exciting and dramatic in order to justify the story. In this, he belongs to the traditions of the oral narrative rather than that of the modern short story.

Al-Misrātī writes his stories as if addressing a gathering of friends or an audience in a café rather than a reader in the privacy of his home. As in the manner of the café raconteur, he cannot resist inserting an anecdote when he sees fit nor can he be restrained from passing a comment when he considers that the situation requires one. Also like the public story teller, he is never able to resist the urge to display his knowledge of the historical background to his tale.

"Mismār Mussolini"<sup>1</sup> (Mussolini's Nail) is one of his stories which can serve as an example of al-Misrātī's overriding passion for the craft of the public story teller. Here he looks to past history for his subject and carefully chooses an event which has the required ingredients: excitement as well as nobility. The story tells of a

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1. Al-Misrātī, "Mismār Mussolini", Hafna min Ramād, (Beirut 1964), p.9.



Libyan craftsman who is ordered to make a horse saddle which is to be presented to Mussolini for his use on the occasion of his visit to Libya. As a committed patriot, he is loath to make the saddle, but when he is intimidated he decides to comply with the request. However, he inserts a hidden nail in the saddle which is intended to injure the rider when it is used. In a humorous style the writer describes how this act of sabotage proceeds as planned: Mussolini rides the horse on this new saddle especially made for him, the nail penetrates his flesh, he screams, but the crowd does not notice as they take his gesturing grimace as part of his rhetorical histrionics, and they continue to clap. The saddle maker, having achieved his goal is happy to pay the price.

This is a very suitable subject for an impressive short story. But al-Misrātī could not bring himself to treat it as one. Indulging his passion for the oral form, he starts his story with a passionate introduction describing the state of the country under Fascist rule:

"Libya was under the heel of the Fascists, Il Duce's soldiers gave themselves free rein all over the country, they massacred half the population, set up their gallows, and crammed the jails. They usurped property and handed the most fertile lands to the sons of Italy..."<sup>1</sup>

As the Italian Governor General was a colourful character, al-Misrātī cannot resist the temptation to dedicate a few pages to describing the life style of Balbo, his artificial air of grandeur, his playboy

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1. Ibid., p.9.



behaviour, his palaces, and his parties where the only Arab among his close circle was a prostitute called Hūriyya:

"Should her dress require a piece of silk thread or her hair a tiny bow, a plane would fly from Ghadāmis or Tripoli destined for Rome, and in two hours time, the desired silk thread or bow would be here."<sup>1</sup>

Al-Miṣrātī goes on to describe the preparations for Mussolini's visit to Tripoli, and only after a few pages does he introduce us to his main character, the Libyan craftsman Far<sup>c</sup>ās, giving a detailed account of his past life, the manner in which he became a craftsman, the martyrdom of his father and the degree to which he hated the Fascists, particularly their leader. He describes how he performed a private ritual at home, where, every day he burned photographs of the Italian dictator, teaching his children to hate their occupiers. The private life of this patriot could in itself have become a short story. However, like the story teller who will stop himself in mid-sentence and conclude by saying "...so much for that... now where was I?", al-Miṣrātī too switches from the home life of the saddlemaker to the narrative in which he describes how Balbo sends a messenger asking Far<sup>c</sup>ās to make the saddle, the refusal, the threat, and the decision to make it a very special saddle. Had the writer omitted all those introductory pages and all those tales and historical details which take up three quarters of the story and had

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1. Ibid., p.10.

he started at the point where the messenger arrives at Far<sup>C</sup>ās's shop he would have ended up with a compact, well-organised, short story.

Al-Misrātī writes his stories as if he is communicating them orally. As a public story teller, humour is therefore part of his trade, and this humour is most evident in his caricature stories when he is closest to the art of the cartoonist, emphasising a feature of his character using overblown rhetoric and exaggerated delineation. In "Khalīfa Abū Ra'sayn wa-Hikāyat al-Mūsā"<sup>1</sup> (The Two-Headed Khalīfa and the Tale of the Razor) he exaggerates a physical feature in his character, in this case, his head which causes embarrassment to his cousin who goes to buy him a fez. However, his big head does not protect him from being outwitted by a youngster who steals his money on his visit to the city, and, as a result, he becomes suspicious of all city people, to whom he thereafter only talks from a distance.

In "al-Ustādh Mushmakhirrā"<sup>2</sup> (The Lofty Master) he exaggerates the sense of pride and righteousness in a school teacher, whom his pupils have nicknamed "Mushmakhirrā" an old word meaning "lofty" or one who behaves in a lofty manner. In spite of his loftiness, the school teacher is put in situations where he has constantly to swallow

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1. Al-Misrātī, "Khalīfa Abū Ra'sayn wa-Hikāyat al-Mūsā",  
al-Shirā<sup>C</sup> al-Mumazzaq, (Cairo 1963), p.241.

2. Al-Misrātī, "al-Ustādh Mushmakhirrā", al-Shams wa-al-Ghirbāl,  
(Cairo 1977), p.237.

humiliation and insults, being unable to realise his lofty aspirations. In "Tarjamat Hayāt Fulān Bay"<sup>1</sup> (The Life Story of Fulān Bay) the writer plays on the exaggerated ignorance of the newly appointed minister. In "Za<sup>c</sup>tar wa-Kanz la Yafnā"<sup>2</sup> (Za<sup>c</sup>tir and an Inexhaustable Treasure) he plays on the greed of a shopkeeper who wants to be on the government payroll and ends up being robbed of his money by some thieves who exploit his dream of a post in the government. In "Darībat al-Adab"<sup>3</sup> (The Price of Literature) he plays on the enthusiasm of a young writer who wants to observe how village people behave in the city in order to write an accurate story about them. He follows a group of villagers, who become suspicious of him and, taking him for an informer, they beat him up. There is a highly entertaining story "Mu<sup>c</sup>anqar Tāqiyyatuh"<sup>4</sup> (With His Fez Tilted) a colloquial phrase which refers to braggarts. The boastful man here is Dirghām, who, for about forty years, has never left his farm to go to the city centre which was only a few miles away. His peculiar conduct became the butt of popular jokes and his fame even reached Rajab Pasha, the Ottoman Wali of Tripoli. In order to entice Dirghām to the city, he sends, as a joke, his personal guard

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1. Al-Misrātī, "Tarjamat Hayāt Fulān Bay", al-Shams wa-al-Ghirbāl, p.74.
  2. Al-Misrātī, "Za<sup>c</sup>tar wa-Kanz la Yafnā", al-Shirā<sup>c</sup> al-Mumazzaq, p.67.
  3. Al-Misrātī, "Darībat al-Adab", al-Shirā<sup>c</sup> al-Mumazzaq, p.195.
  4. Al-Misrātī, "Mu<sup>c</sup>anqar Tāqiyyatuh", al-Shams wa-al-Ghirbāl, p.5.



to inform Dirghām that the Wali forbids him to enter the city centre. Once Dirghām hears this he cannot resist the newly acquired attraction he has developed towards the city centre. The humour in this story stems naturally from the situation. The caricaturist in al-Miṣrātī never fails to find a humorous subject on which to draw.

One of al-Miṣrātī's characteristic preoccupations is that of incongruity which is illustrated by instances of misplaced charity or presents exaggerated examples of the ironies of life. In "Atwal Shanab"<sup>1</sup> (The Longest Moustache), the oil company, out of pretended compassion for its workers, decides to reward the person who happens to have the longest moustache among its workers. This is Sulaymān Shanābū, who in preparation for the award ceremony goes to the barber's shop where the barber makes a mistake and shaves off his moustache. "Zaqtut wa-Laylat al-Mawṣim"<sup>2</sup> (Zaqtut on the Eve of the Feast Day) also depicts this contrast, and is also about compassion coming at the wrong time. Once Zaqtut is out of prison, with no friends, and no place to go to, he decides to return to prison, but whenever he tries to break the law, he finds that he is being forgiven and allowed to go free. In "Sultān wa al-Karrūsa"<sup>3</sup> (Sultan and the Carriage) we are told of an old impoverished cab driver. One day he finds that a car has been sent by the society for

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1. Al-Miṣrātī, "Atwal Shanab", al-Shirā<sup>c</sup> al-Mumazzaq, p.49.

2. Al-Miṣrātī, "Zaqtut wa-Laylat al-Mawṣim", al-Shirā<sup>c</sup> al-Mumazzaq, p.9.

3. Al-Miṣrātī, "Sultān wa-al-Karrūsa", al-Shams wa-al-Ghirbāl, p.161.

the welfare of animals, to take away his horse, thus leaving him with no means to support himself. While there are societies to save animals, there are no societies to save human beings; compassion but again misplaced compassion.

Al-Miṣrātī's favourite Egyptian writer is Ibrāhīm al-Māzinī, although we see no direct influence as regards the plot or situations or characters of al-Māzinī's novels, yet the humour and sarcasm by which al-Māzinī has made a name for himself is a characteristic feature of al-Miṣrātī's writings. Al-Miṣrātī also acknowledges his admiration for the founding fathers of the short story, such as Maupassant and Chekhov,<sup>1</sup> although we can attribute nothing in his technique or treatment to those two writers. Nevertheless echoes of their choice of subject matter can be found in some of al-Miṣrātī's stories. "Al-Maṣāgh"<sup>2</sup> (The Jewellery) is about a woman who insists that her husband obtains some jewellery for her to wear to a wedding party. As he cannot afford to buy such luxury, they agree to hire an expensive necklace for one day; on her way back from the wedding she loses the necklace and they spend the rest of their lives in debt, to pay for the jewellery they have bought to replace the necklace. Al-Miṣrātī does not go as far as to make the necklace a false one, lest the whole story would then be borrowed from Maupassant's famous story "The Necklace".

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1. This information is based on a letter dated 17.6.82, in answer to questions.

2. Al-Miṣrātī, "Al-Maṣāgh", al-Shirā<sup>c</sup> al-Mumazzaq, p.27.



Another story bears strong resemblance to one of Chekhov's stories. It is entitled "Bunayyat al-Mutaṣarrif"<sup>1</sup> (The Administrator's Little Daughter) and depicts an official who is disturbed during his siesta by children throwing stones at his house. Angered by this, he goes out to shout at his neighbours calling them names and accusing them of ignorance and vulgarity. However, on learning that the child who was playing in front of his house was the little daughter of the British administrator, his anger turns to joy, and he notes how cheerful and energetic this little girl is. The story echoes elements of Chekhov's "The Chameleon", which depicts the hypocrisy of a policeman who is angered by irresponsible members of his community who allow their shabby dogs to roam free, but his attitude changes when he hears that a certain dog belongs to a high-ranking official.

Al-Miṣrātī's stories may gain more value with the passage of time for the richness of their local colour and flavour, and extravagant portrayal of a disappearing social setting with all its conventions and patterns of behaviour that existed prior to the discovery of oil and the coming of the revolution. As for the artistic merit of these stories, critics may still have to dismiss them as proper short stories, but they cannot deny them the legitimacy they derive from the ancient tradition of oral literature.

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1. Al-Miṣrātī, "Bunayyat al-Mutaṣarrif", al-Shams wa-al-Ghirbāl, p.182.



The Tell-a-Tale approach therefore belongs to an older tradition than the short story, and there will always be a place for it, attracting those who feel unable to meet the demands of the artistic short story, or those who feel more affinity with the oral tradition and want to breathe a new life into the fading craft of the public story teller.

## Chapter Six

### THE REALISTIC APPROACH

KĀMIL AL-MAQHŪR - KHALĪFA AL-TIKBĀLĪ -  
BASHĪR AL-HĀSHIMĪ - YŪSUF AL-SHARĪF -  
IBRĀHĪM AL-KŪNĪ

A major development in the Libyan short story came about with the arrival on the literary scene of writers with a new outlook, and a new awareness of social realities, conveying their strong indignation against the backward and unjust social system, finding in the realistic story a suitable medium by which they could express their anger and grievances. Their enthusiasm for the realistic approach was in accordance with their deep awareness of the pressing social issues and their concern for the poor and down-trodden. They identified themselves with their causes, influenced by the school of social realism, so popular amongst Arab writers during the Fifties, and reacted strongly against the romantic writers and their isolation from the realities of everyday life and the subjective and personal treatment of their stories. They were very much concerned with writing stories that were true to life, striving hard to be authentic with their characters, with the situations and the settings in their stories, choosing themes that were closer to the national cause of their country, depicting the life of the ordinary person in his daily occupations and concerns. They introduce the Libyan personality in its reality as against the attempts of the colonial rulers to distort it. Through them the short story could act as a window through which those who were interested in studying the Libyan personality could look and view it in perspective. As one writer has noted, "Perhaps the



widest and most fertile field in which to seek the Libyan personality and its characteristic features is in the field of the short story."<sup>1</sup>

It is in the stories of these writers that the emphasis on the true identity of the country is most evident: trying their best to give as accurate a picture as possible of life around them, and enriching their stories with detailed description of the social environment.

In their bid to capture the social realities of the people in their everyday life they adopted different realistic styles, sometimes to the extent of imitating life as it happens, giving graphic descriptions and writing a reportage type of story, but mostly writers would select their material, and try to grasp the indicative and suggestive moment to capture the essence of the situation rather than copying life as it happens, as in the case of Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī.

The most promising of these newly-arrived writers was Kāmil al-Maḡhūr, a young lawyer, who was finishing his education in Egypt when he was influenced by the main trend dominating Egyptian literary life. In Egypt there was a literary page in the daily newspaper al-Misrī which served as a platform for the advocates of the school of social realism in the early Fifties and published contributions from writers known for their socialist ideas. Among

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1. Amīn Māzin, "Malāmiḥ al-Shakhṣiyya al-Lībiyya fī 14 Qiṣṣa min Madīnatī", al-Ruwwad (Tripoli), December 1965, p.11.

them were Maḥmūd Amīn al-<sup>Ḥ</sup>Ālim, Ḥasan Fu'ād, <sup>Ḥ</sup>Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī, Sa<sup>Ḥ</sup>ad Makkāwī.<sup>1</sup> This newspaper also published the earliest stories of Yūsuf Idrīs as well as articles and stories by <sup>Ḥ</sup>Abd al-Raḥmān al-Khamīsī. But the major influence on the life of this Libyan law student was the ideas and writings of Maḥmūd Amīn al-<sup>Ḥ</sup>Ālim, who though not a short story writer himself, was able through his literary criticism to propagate social realism, particularly with a book which he wrote with another socialist writer <sup>Ḥ</sup>Abd al-<sup>Ḥ</sup>Azīm Anīs, Fī al-Thaqāfa al-Misriyya.<sup>2</sup> This book, more than any other influence, was to allow al-Maqḥūr to form his ideas on the role of the writer in society. Even before his return to Libya in 1957, he had begun to send stories to be published in the monthly magazine Tarābulus al-Gharb, using a radically different approach and introducing a new concept and a new maturity to the Libyan short story. His achievement in this field included both form and content. As regards form, he was the first to write stories free of the defects characteristic of the romantic writers, namely, exaggerated rhetoric, sentimental language, digression and deviation. In these stories he demonstrates that he is aware of what the art of the short story demands: he shows himself capable of meeting these by writing well-balanced

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1. Sayyid Ḥāmid al-Nassāj, Ittijāhāt al Qissa al Misriyya al-Qasīra (Cairo 1978), p.258.

2. Maḥmūd Amīn al-<sup>Ḥ</sup>Ālim and <sup>Ḥ</sup>Abd al-<sup>Ḥ</sup>Azīm Anīs, Fī al-Thaqāfa al-Misriyya, (Cairo 1955).



stories, usually with a key moment, conveyed in condensed language, with which he tries his best to make every sentence contribute to the development of the story. As regards content he also introduces awareness of social reality when matters of public interest become the private and intimate concern of a person, where economic and social factors determine people's lives and not destiny and blind chance as is the case in the stories before him.

Collections of his stories were published in two volumes, 14 Qissa min Madīnatī<sup>1</sup> (14 Stories from my City) and al-Ams al-Mashnūq<sup>2</sup> (The Strangled Yesterday). Most of al-Maqhūr's stories fall into three groups. They are either character stories such as "Būkha",<sup>3</sup> "Āshūr",<sup>4</sup> and "Aynāh Khaṭṭān Aswadān"<sup>5</sup> (His Eyes are Two Black Lines) where the focus is on the character and the event becomes insignificant; or situation stories like "al-Ṭarīq"<sup>6</sup> (The Road), "al-Bukā'"<sup>7</sup> (Crying), "al-Mīlād"<sup>8</sup> (The Birth), "al-Yamīn"<sup>9</sup> (The Oath) where the writer is

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1. Kāmil al-Maqhūr, 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, 2nd ed., (Tripoli 1978).

2. Al-Maqhūr, al-Ams al-Mashnūq, 2nd ed., (Tripoli 1979).

3. Al-Maqhūr, "Būkha", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, p.17.

4. Al-Maqhūr, "Āshūr", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, p.147.

5. Al-Maqhūr, "Aynāh Khaṭṭān Aswadān", al-Ams al-Mashnūq, p.147.

6. Al-Maqhūr, "al-Ṭarīq", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, p.5.

7. Al-Maqhūr, "al-Bukā'", al-Ams al-Mashnūq, p.131.

8. Al-Maqhūr, "al-Mīlād", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, p.83.

9. Al-Maqhūr, "al-Yamīn", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, p.97.



merely concerned with introducing "the slice of life" story. The third group is "the plotted story" where he depicts a particular event in the life of his character or characters, as, for example, in "al-Khā'ifūn"<sup>1</sup> (The Frightened), "al-Sabab"<sup>2</sup> (The Reason), "al-Sundūq al-Akhdar"<sup>3</sup> (The Green Box), as in ~~most of the rest of~~ <sup>in many other</sup> his stories. When his first book 14 Qissa min Madīnatī came out in 1965, the first to praise al-Maqhūr for his achievement was Mahmūd Amīn al-<sup>c</sup>Ālim:

"He adds another contribution to the modern Arabic short story; a writer with sharp insight, deep sensitivity, his stories are an expressive and concentrated picture of his Libyan people, the events are those of the simple people and his heroes are the ordinary sons of the working and productive people."<sup>4</sup>

Although Kāmil al-Maqhūr did not write many stories, his total output amounting to a mere twenty stories, and since 1966 he has abandoned writing short stories altogether, in these twenty stories he covers every major event in modern Libyan history: the Libyan struggle against the Italians in "al-Sabab"<sup>5</sup> and "<sup>c</sup>Āshūr"<sup>6</sup>, the

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1. Al-Maqhūr, "al-Khā'ifūn", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, p.41.

2. Al-Maqhūr, "al-Sabab", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, p.59.

3. Al-Maqhūr, "al-Sundūq al-Akhdar", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, p.133.

4. Mahmūd Amīn al-<sup>c</sup>Ālim, "14 Qissa min Madīnatī", al-Ruwwad (Tripoli), December 1965, p.60.

5. Loc.cit.

6. Loc.cit.

tragedies of the Second World War in "al-Khā'ifūn",<sup>1</sup> the struggle for independence and the popular uprising against the British Mandate in "Qalb al-Madīna",<sup>2</sup> the popular opposition to the installation of the American military base in "al-Sūr"<sup>3</sup> and the treatment of the Libyan workers inside the base in "Akhir al-Halaqa",<sup>4</sup> the people's opposition to the royalist regime in "al-Ams al-Mashnūq".<sup>5</sup> He also dealt with the Libyan working man in his different trades and professions, as a fisherman ("al-Sundūq al-Akhdar")<sup>6</sup> or as a docker ("Būkha")<sup>7</sup> or as a bus driver ("al-Tarīq")<sup>8</sup> or as a primary school teacher ("Aynāh Khaṭṭān Aswadān").<sup>9</sup> The expression of his political ideas is sometimes very direct, at other times it is only implicit, but a political message can be found in every story. Al-Maqhūr's strong sense of mission may have prevented him from looking into other areas in human behaviour, yet it gives his stories a great intensity and clear direction and an unmistakable sense of purpose.

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1. Loc.cit.

2. Al-Maqhūr, "Qalb al-Madīna", al-Ams al-Mashnūq, p.159.

3. Al-Maqhūr, "al-Sūr", 14 Qiṣṣa min Madīnatī, p.67.

4. Al-Maqhūr, "Akhir al-Halaqa", 14 Qiṣṣa min Madīnatī, p.119.

5. Al-Maqhūr, "al-Ams al-Mashnūq", al-Ams al-Mashnūq, p.7.

6. Loc.cit.

7. Loc.cit.

8. Loc.cit.

9. Loc.cit.

His sentences are short, intense and suggestive, although he is constantly engrossed in external description, but this is never tedious, repetitive or monotonous, which is the major fault of many other realistic writers who indulge in an excess of external description. Al-Maqhūr always knows what he wants to say and he says it in the most commanding way. He has no time for irrelevant detail, idle phrase or unnecessary explanation, to the extent that he sometimes forgets even necessary explanation. It sometimes happens that in the intensity of a situation he neglects to explain to his reader the reason behind certain actions on the part of his character. We can observe, for example, that the character in "Inshirāh"<sup>1</sup> undergoes a change of mood from being happy and carefree, enjoying the company of the little girl next door, to one of melancholy and depression. However we have no clue to the reason for this emotional change save for a passing mention of an imminent examination, which cannot in itself convincingly explain this drastic change. As for the character in "Dhikrayāt Lā Ah<sup>am</sup>miyya Lahā"<sup>2</sup> (Insignificant Memories), he suffers arrest and trial. The narration is conveyed in the first person, and we are expected to sympathise with the narrator's confusion and alienation at being unjustly condemned without knowing the circumstances which have led to his arrest. The reader is not given any insight into the reality behind

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1. Al-Maqhūr, "Inshirāh", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, p.157.

2. Al-Maqhūr, "Dhikrayāt Lā Ah<sup>am</sup>miyya Lahā", al-Ams al-Mashnūq, p.119.



the events which result in imprisonment. In fact it ends with no story in the story, amounting merely to a description, albeit vividly portrayed, of the atmosphere inside the court. "Zayn al-Qamar"<sup>1</sup> (The Beauty of the Moon) deals almost with the same subject but with a better degree of success. It is told in the first person; the narrator is a manual worker who earns twenty piasters a day. He is taken to prison and beaten up because he has been drunk. The cell he is taken to is dark dank and dirty, full of the smell of urine. It is also occupied by three other people; amongst them is <sup>c</sup>Āshūr, his drinking mate, whom he recognizes on hearing him crying while at the same time trying to sing his favourite song, "The Beauty of the Moon". Another prisoner is lying on the floor coughing blood; there are cuts and bruises all over his body because of the beatings. The third is a well-built man with a sinister look, laughing at them and spitting in their faces for being in prison on a trivial charge like drinking: real men, in his opinion, come to prison because they have done something much more important, such as murder. His was a crime of passion. The wounded man asks for a drink of water, but the prison guards ignore him. The killer then stands up and starts banging on the door of the cell, shouting and swearing at the guards. Encouraged by the man's bravery and determination to rescue their partner in the cell, they all join in staging the protest.

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1. Al-Maqhūr, "Zayn al-Qamar", al-Ams al-Mashnūq", p.105.

The story, while attempting to illustrate the difficult life a poor working man has to lead, and the ordeals he has to endure, also illustrates the brutality of the police and the oppressive measures they employ in dealing with ordinary people. But the people's willpower and determination and sense of comradeship even inside a rough prison and under brutal conditions are never to be crushed. The contrast between the beautiful world suggested in the title and the grim reality of the story, is an indication of al-Maqhūr's skill and craftsmanship.

In most of his situation stories there is little in the way of events the writer being mainly concerned with depicting a tense atmosphere with special attention to the material environment surrounding his characters.

In "al-Tarīq"<sup>1</sup> he takes forty people from their familiar environment and puts them together in a bus crossing the desert from Tripoli to Benghazi. The assembled characters are from different social backgrounds, coming with their different attitudes, concerns and occupations. Some youngsters are worried about their drink and their girls, and a religious man is angered by their disregard of Islamic propriety. There are children, and women, and there is the driver whose thoughts dwell on his sick child whom he has left at home in Tripoli. When all the passengers are asleep the driver alone is awake, driving his bus. However the driver is comforted by the company of a child, the same age as his own, who alone among

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1. Loc.cit.



the passengers is unable to sleep and talks to the driver. Although the bus is travelling the relatively short distance between two towns, the trip is made to symbolise the journey of all society through life itself. He skilfully escapes the risk of having a story with so many characters by having the driver in the centre of his attention.

One of his most successfully plotted stories is "al-Kura"<sup>1</sup> (The Ball). While poverty has driven the mother into prostitution, her son <sup>C</sup>Abd Allāh has to suffer the humiliation of the children of the neighbourhood, especially the taunts of the son of a wealthy man who owns the ball with which the children play. However <sup>C</sup>Abd Allāh's mother buys him a bigger and more colourful ball, and the children immediately reject the wealthy man's son, and join <sup>C</sup>Abd Allāh to play with him. The innocence of these children provides the child with relief from the prejudices of the world of adults. "Al-Kura" demonstrates al-Maḡhūr's affection for the human touch, which sometimes constitutes part of the story, if not the whole story.

Al-Maḡhūr is more at ease when writing a character story, when he usually writes about people he knows and feels compassion for. He is able to admire their endurance for in spite of tremendous suffering they are still resilient and maintain the struggle for a better life. There is no sentimentality in his treatment of these characters, nor

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1. Al-Maḡhūr, "al-Kura", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, p.41.



does he ask his reader to pity them; rather he respects them. Al-Maqhūr works hard to introduce real and lively people, creating as complete and rounded characters as a short story will allow; nor does he hide their weakness or their vulgarity. His belief in the positive hero allows him to create characters that are always able to maintain their integrity and honesty. He usually draws his characters from the working population, except in one story, his last, which he wrote in the mid-Sixties, where he chooses a teacher in a primary school by way of tribute to his life-time career in teaching. This last story is also one of his best character stories, entitled "Aynāh Khaṭṭān Aswadān",<sup>1</sup> where we meet al-Ustādh al-Hādī, contemplating his many years in teaching. While he grows old, the children seem to be younger each year:

"They do not change, every year they look as young as ever, they look even younger than those of the previous year. They create with their noise small lines on his face, lines that get deeper year by year, and they steal the light from his eyes' ray after the other."<sup>2</sup>

Al-Hādī feels frustrated; his life has been wasted on these ungrateful little creatures. But this gloomy moment does not last long, for an Inspector comes to the school. Al-Hādī is anxious lest his pupils disgrace him. But to his joy the Inspector shows only approval with his class and al-Hādī cannot stop a tear from rolling

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1. Loc.cit.

2. Ibid., p.151.

down his cheek. He takes off his glasses to wipe the tears and the children see his eyes reduced to two black lines. This is the reward which this dedicated teacher sought throughout his professional life. Thus does al-Maqhūr portray al-Hādī with generous heart, just as he portrays the other character in "<sup>c</sup>Āshūr", "Būkha" and "al-Bukā'", whom he has drawn from amongst the common folk of his city, for whom he harbours great love and respect.

When Khalīfa al-Tikbālī started publishing his stories in 1958, he began with a clear perception of his task as an instigator of social change, and an already formed vision of the type of society he wanted, fighting to implement his views and to express his vision of social justice and social equality, maintaining this outlook consistently throughout his career as a writer. He is a realistic short story writer who covers a wide range of aspects of life in his country, presenting the ordinary Libyan people in their different pursuits, occupations and concerns.

From an early age al-Tikbālī had to work as an unskilled worker to earn his living. He worked for a few years in a filling station, and then in the late Fifties he travelled to Germany looking for work and remained there for three years. In 1963 he joined the military academy and graduated as an officer in 1965. In June 1966 he entered the military hospital to have a minor operation and died unexpectedly in surgery at the age of 28. During his short career of eight years as a writer he produced more than forty short stories as well as a few articles on literature. He threw in his lot with the people of his country, and remained faithful to his ideals as a



revolutionary writer who advocated social and political change, focusing on the conflict between the forces of oppression and the power of the people in their resistance to it.

Khalīfa al-Tikbālī wrote his stories with a mature and developed perception of what the art of short stories requires, paying great attention to the artistic presentation, carefully choosing the suggestive and illuminating moment, using his craft to wage an uncompromising fight against the prevailing social ills. His targets were backwardness, ignorance, poverty and political suppression. His stories are marked with a strong sense of protest, urging the people of his country to rebel against an unjust social system.

Tamarrud<sup>1</sup> (Rebellion), the title he chooses for his first collection of short stories which brought him the second prize in a competition arranged by the Ministry of Information and Culture in Libya in 1965, can serve as a key to his personality and writings, and is very much indicative of his rebellious spirit. The title story in this collection is about a boy rebelling against the tyranny of his elder brother. This rebellious behaviour is a characteristic feature of the people he portrays. His characters do not happily accept their fate, they fight and challenge, and try their utmost to change the circumstances around them and improve on their lives. They do not just drift with the current, or sit idly awaiting whatever comes their way - they participate in shaping their lives and

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1. Khalīfa al-Tikbālī, Tamarrud, (Tripoli 1966).



determining their own fate. That perhaps echoes some of Khalīfa al-Tikbālī's own personality: his determination and willpower which allowed him to rise above his circumstances. As a child he was denied any education above the elementary level, yet through dedication and faith in his own ability he was able to educate himself and while working as a filling station attendant he was able to read and continue learning until he became a writer himself.

When he started writing his short stories it was because he felt he had things to say about these people who helped him through his life. His heroes are those simple ordinary people, celebrating their spirit and giving significance to their insignificant moments, showing his admiration for them and the pride he takes in their struggle and rebellion.

His difficult childhood supplied him with material for many short stories: children are sometimes treated like grownups, shouldering the responsibility of adults, or becoming the victims of social diseases and illnesses. Stories such as "Tamarrud",<sup>1</sup> al-Budhūr al-Dā'i<sup>c</sup>a"<sup>2</sup> (Wasted Seeds), "Kān Ya<sup>c</sup>rifuh"<sup>3</sup> (He Knew Him), "Ta'āmur"<sup>4</sup> (Conspiracy), "Hikāyat Kidhba"<sup>5</sup> (The Tale of a Lie). These children

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1. Khalīfa al-Tikbālī, "Tamarrud", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, (Libya 1976), p.7.

2. Al-Tikbālī, "al-Budhūr al-Dā'i<sup>c</sup>a", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.71.

3. Al-Tikbālī, "Kān Ya<sup>c</sup>rifuh", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.276.

4. Al-Tikbālī, "Ta'āmur", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.327.

5. Al-Tikbālī, "Hikāyat Kidhba", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.93.

are the product of an environment that fails to provide enough care for them or recognize their special nature and potentialities as children. They, therefore, take matters into their own hands, sometimes misguidedly, but at least they follow the dictates of their own rebellious spirit, learning from their own experience.

Youth in Khalīfa al-Tikbālī's stories are more capable of coping with difficult situations. "Inqaddimlak Ukhtī Su<sup>c</sup>ād"<sup>1</sup> (May I Introduce my Sister Suad) is a story about youth and love, a well constructed story introducing a hopeful picture of Libyan youth as the forces of change in society. Fathī, the main character in the story, does not submit to the logic of his mother, who represents the older generation and who believes in the old ways of arranged marriages. The girl whom he loves is aware of her right to marry the man she wants, conscious of all the difficulties besetting her love, and she goes about it in a rational manner, helped by her brother who behaves according to the spirit of the modern age. A beautiful story full of the passions and vitality of youth, told in a poetical transcendant style.

This is how he describes the feeling of Fathī after discovering that Su'ād is in love with him:

"In spite of his nervousness and emotions, he walks with a proud and assured manner. He walks like the prophet Moses must have walked after God had spoken to him, in humble confidence, with subtle pride, full of the confidence of

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1. Al-Tikbālī, "Inqaddimlak Ukhtī Su'ād", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.125.



a man loved by a beautiful woman. A wonderful creature had just given him her love, and entrusted him with her honour and secrets. Overwhelmed by the feeling of pride and the pleasure in perceiving his own importance he felt a divine sweet happiness at being a unique and distinguished person, because unlike many of his age group, he now occupied a place in the heart of a girl. A little sensitive heart was now beating for him."<sup>1</sup>

But the struggle against an unjust social system and outdated traditions does not always come to a happy conclusion. In other stories such as "al-Isba' al-Majrūh"<sup>2</sup> (The Wounded Finger) and "Kalām al-Nās"<sup>3</sup> (The Talk of the People), "al-Ism al-Haqīqī"<sup>4</sup> (The Real Name), "Hamajiyya"<sup>5</sup> (Savagery) and "al-Faqīh"<sup>6</sup> (The Religious Healer), people fall victims to these social ills and social backwardness. In "al-Faqīh" the writer shows us it is not only poverty that degrades man, ignorance is as degrading as poverty: when people believe in myths, they can be easily fooled by crooks like "al-Faqīh Muḥammad", himself a victim of poverty and ignorance, and become apathetic, believing that they can do nothing

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1. Ibid., p.127.

2. Al-Tikbālī, "al-Isba' al-Majrūh" al-A<sup>C</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.101.

3. Al-Tikbālī, "Kalām al-Nās", al-A<sup>C</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.163.

4. Al-Tikbālī, "al-Ism al-Haqīqī" al-A<sup>C</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.268.

5. Al-Tikbālī, "Hamajiyya" al-A<sup>C</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.246.

6. Al-Tikbālī, "al-Faqīh", al-A<sup>C</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.33.



to change their destiny. The story tells of the shanty town people, in times when shanty towns were a familiar sight in Libya.

"This shanty town is a trial to man's endurance when exposed to such misery and wretchedness."<sup>1</sup>

The story tells of a shanty town family bringing a religious healer to their hut to treat their sick daughter:

"The faqīh then decided in a warning tone that the girl's illness was deadly, for she was possessed by an evil spirit which had sucked up all her strength and stature. But he added, saying it in a way which brought hope to the hearts of the wretched listeners, that he, with the help and power of God, would be able to heal the sick girl and defeat the tyrannical and unbelieving evil spirit. Then he went on to say that out of dedication and desire to fulfil his duty he had decided to devote himself exclusively to the treatment of the sick girl, using all his might and knowledge. He then asked the couple to leave the hut."<sup>2</sup>

He asked that he should be left alone with the young woman to free her body from the evil spirit; but it was soon found out that he was only preparing the ground for himself to have an opportunity to assault the girl sexually.

In this story al-Tikbālī seems to have set himself to writing a story that contains all the factors that contribute to man's degradation and misery: ignorance, poverty and sexual repression.

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1. Ibid., p.37.

2. Ibid., p.45.

Even in the case of "al-Faqīh", although he is portrayed in his total irritability, enough light is shed on the victimizing process he himself has undergone.

Khalīfa al-Tikbālī does not fail to notice that the social oppression is only the other face of an oppressive political system. "Al-Karāma"<sup>1</sup> (Dignity) can serve here as a good example of al-Tikbālī's method in dealing with socio-political themes. It is a story about the frustration of a Libyan worker in the oil-fields, where the big companies exploit manual workers while the country is still under the influence of foreign powers. His latent feelings of injustice and rebellion are suddenly awakened by three American technicians who order him to give them a melon. Their manner of addressing him triggers off an ancient feeling of hatred and vindictiveness. This becomes an explosive moment, and a fight breaks out. The worker refuses to hand over a melon from the stores. The story unfolds as the thoughts of its main character develop throughout the progress of the quarrel. The worker is not in control of his actions, he does not know why he has refused such a simple request, and in the process of refusing he finds he has to justify his actions to himself. Although written in the first person, we feel at a distance from the actions for the narrator himself is surprised at his own reactions and the story consists mainly of his thoughts as he both explains and justifies what he has done.

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1. Al-Tikbālī, "al-Karāma", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.118.



The writer remains a mere observer: he does not lead the action, the action leads him. When the story starts the Libyan worker is not prepared for any action; he is not aware of any anger at the way he is treated in this camp. In fact he is happy to have been offered the work, which is comparatively easy, for he is a mere watchman guarding a food store. He even accepts the difference in treatment between the Libyans and the non-Libyans: they have better salaries, better accommodation, better food, but that is mainly because the nature of their work is different. He has no objection to all that, for he is merely an ordinary simple-minded person, and he has not been introduced as a hero of social and political equality, or a man who sets himself the task of performing remarkable feats of bravery and patriotism. Even when he reacts angrily at the three Americans it is only because he wants to assert himself in his role as a watchman. As they have always treated him as a nonentity, he wants to show them that he is indeed an entity, that he has a role and function in life, and at that moment of confrontation when he falls back on his inner resources, seeking some spiritual support, the perception dawns on him that these are the people who have suppressed him and his like throughout history. Now here, in his own land, his own desert, there is a new wealth gushing out from the soil and these are the people who benefit from it, denying him a share in the wealth. In retaliation, in a simple naive way, he decides to deny them the only thing he is now in control of, a watermelon.

This is the whole story: a simple plot, simple notions, told in a masterly manner where the action develops in a natural, smooth way



until it arrives at its climax. From the beginning of the story we are confronted with the contrasting colours of the situation: the Libyan worker is introduced as somebody capable of appreciating the beauty of the desert, enjoying a moment of peace and tranquility:

"I was sitting in the open, watching the whispering stars, thinking, captivated by the beauty of the night that dominated my heart and mind and made me feel relaxed and happy. I was affected by the warm breeze which touched my face, the breeze that carried in its folds thousands of vague and anonymous messages."<sup>1</sup>

A poetic beginning about peace and the beauty of the night in the desert, it does not suggest any conflict or violence. But like a musician starting from a low note, the atmosphere gradually grows with intensity to a crescendo:

"As I was watching the night, three figures appeared in the darkness. They were most certainly coming from the direction of the noisy drilling machine. I recognized them when they entered the circle of light shining from the store..."<sup>2</sup>

They are the three Americans coming for a watermelon. Although melons are usually there for the Arabs as the foreign workers have other fruits, yet he is instructed to give the foreign staff whatever they want. Something comes over him and makes him decide to confront them; he is in no position to do so, he is merely a watchman and they are the masters of the camp, yet he hesitates to

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1. Ibid., p.118.

2. Ibid., pp.118-9.

answer them: he has not yet decided what he is going to do now that they have asked him for the melon:

"Trying to gain some time I said,  
'And what do you want the watermelon for?'"<sup>1</sup>

A stupid question no doubt, but it allows him time to gain some control over the situation: he too can ask questions, however silly they may be, and deal with the Americans on the same footing. He knows that he is finally bound to give them what they ask for; he only wants to prove one point, that he is there, and that he exists. The whole clash might have been avoided had they had some sense of humour, but they seem to be surprised at his question and react angrily at his impudence, ordering him to give them the melon and shut up. In response he finds himself saying something he never thought of before:

"I have no melon for you."<sup>2</sup>

He himself is surprised at this utterance, for he does not know why he should have said this:

"It was not my place to say it, I knew that for sure; I knew that I was going to be punished and might even be sacked because of what I had just said. I was sure that in some way they would, in spite of me, take what they wanted; no matter how much I tried I would not be able to prevent them even by force, which was outside my capability."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.119.

2. Ibid., p.120.

3. Ibid., p.120.

Only after saying what he has said, does he start searching within himself for motivation, justification, seeking support from past experience and things around him.

The events develop; the writer demonstrates his ability to reveal the hidden emotions his dispossessed worker harbours in the depths of his soul for those who usurp his wealth. The conflict intensifies: the three Americans are angered as the behaviour of the Libyan worker is totally unexpected and unthinkable. They start advancing on him to force him to give up the key to the store. He is frightened lest they kill him, but before they attack him he gets hold of an iron rod and feels assured that he has now control of the situation. He defends himself fiercely: when they reach him he lashes out at one of them causing him to fall down and the others to retreat. When people come out of the camp asking the reason for the quarrel he says with the innocence of a child:

"They wanted our watermelon and I would not give it to them."<sup>1</sup>

Khalīfa al-Tikbālī in these eight short years of his career before his untimely death, was able as a writer to capture the essence of life in his country during that period, writing with great passion, sincerity and anger to the extent that every story he wrote was "a document of protest and an accusing finger pointing at many forces and at those harsh and bitter circumstances".<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.124.

2. Khalīfa Husayn Mustafā, Dhākirat al-Kalimāt, (Tripoli 1980), p.126.



Bashīr al-Hāshimī is a writer of a similar background to that of Khalīfa al-Tikbālī, having also had little formal education and leaving his family at an early age for a life of homelessness and poverty. As a child he worked as a newspaper boy selling and distributing newspapers, sometimes sleeping in the streets. And like al-Tikbālī he found in the realistic story a suitable medium for expressing the state of poverty in which he was raised and brought up. Since he started publishing his stories in 1957, he has produced three collections of short stories: al-Nās wa-al-Dunyā (The People and the World), 1965, Ahzān <sup>C</sup>Ammī al-Dūkālī (The Sorrows of Uncle Dukali), 1967, and al-Aṣābi<sup>C</sup> al-Saghīra (The Little Fingers), 1972), which he later published in a single volume.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Khalīfa al-Tikbālī, al-Hāshimī does not pay much attention to plot, or to events, nor does he seek the key moment: he merely portrays life as it happens, depicting people in their everyday routine. He does not depend on an interesting event to write a story, being quite happy to take a slice of any routine situation and produce from it a story. Unlike al-Tikbālī's his characters seem to accept their fate without protest or rebellion. They do not grumble or complain, they slavishly succumb to their circumstances, making do with their portion in life. However, although they sometimes entertain dreams of betterment, on the whole they seem to be happy with things as they are, enjoying whatever little pleasures they can derive from a hostile environment.

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1. Bashīr al-Hāshimī, 3 Majmu<sup>C</sup>āt Qaṣaṣiyya, (Tripoli N.D. (1980?)).

Al-Hāshimī's stories are free from the technical defects of the early short story writers. The story usually takes a moment in the life of a character, not necessarily a suggestive or indicative moment, as, for instance, the all-too-common turning point in the life of character, rather, he chooses to exploit ordinary moments and usually leaves his characters as he finds them. Rarely are they transformed, or do they undergo an experience which is to shape their future or leave an imprint on their lives. What he writes about usually captures a single moment from which he does not deviate, neither exaggerating his actions nor dramatizing them. He rigidly confines his story to the situation he is portraying, no matter how dull and monotonous it may be. Nor does al-Hāshimī seek to bolster uneventful situations by inserting supporting devices such as anecdotes or sub-stories. He is careful to avoid unnecessary introductions or prolonged endings, and except for a few occasions his stories are generally kept short, concise and to the point. However, he does not venture to experiment, or go beyond the frontiers of ordinary life in its monotonous routine, being mainly concerned with the externals of a situation, seldom penetrating into the deep waters; he remains mostly on the surface. It is as if he wishes to be true to what actually happens. This is not a bad thing in itself but what actually happens in al-Hāshimī's world does not amount to much: he gives merely a fleeting glimpse into the humdrum existence of the people he portrays, a passing glance which never penetrates, never reveals, never exposes.



This hasty glance is paralleled by the description of love in his stories. It is usually provoked by a glance at the shadow of a woman in a window or through a half-open door. Such are his stories, inspired by a glance at his character, and developing into unexpected passions.

His characters are usually cheerful and happy in the face of adversity. Some critics consider this resilience to be the principle merit of his stories, Fawzī al-Bishtī, a Libyan literary critic, thinking that al-Hāshimī

"is able to create real heroes, and through them he touches upon the deep gap between the cruelty of their reality and the steadfastness and resistance that go parallel to it. (His characters) are constantly smiling in the face of crisis... they laugh while they suffer, and they laugh while they are dying of hunger."<sup>1</sup>

They are always laughing and singing, not because they are real heroes as al-Bishtī supposes, but because al-Hāshimī does not see much behind the smiling face: he observes the smile and faithfully reports it. He seems to fail to grasp the heart of the situation and see the sorrows and sadness behind the smiling face.

Although this superficial treatment is due to his obvious limitations as a writer, some of it is no doubt caused by the way he looks upon the difficult years of his boyhood. He does not look upon them with bitterness or regret, he seems to laugh about those

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1. Fawzī al-Bishtī, al-Kalima al-Sharāra, (Tripoli 1974), pp.10-11.



hard years. But al-Hāshimī can afford to be complacent about his former poverty for he escaped from it and was able to make a name for himself in Literature. But his own complacency does not necessarily reflect the attitude of the people who are condemned to lead that sort of life. It seems as if al-Hāshimī, under the guise of a realistic portrayal, is in fact romanticising the depression and squalor of the homeless, the jobless and the penniless.

A tramp was the theme of the first story he wrote and published in 1957, "Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd."<sup>1</sup> Here al-Hāshimī does not romanticise the life of Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd for at that time he himself was still struggling out of his poverty and homelessness; in fact, if anything, he overdramatizes it. Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd the protagonist of the story is starving: he goes for days without food, he sleeps under the arches of the city and when he manages to get hold of some piasters by occasional stints of work as a porter in the big market, he runs to the tavern to join the only friends he has to get drunk. When night comes he again goes looking for an arch or a bridge under which he can spend the night. As if this misfortune is not enough, the writer sees to it that next morning Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd is to be run over and killed. He briefly comments that now that Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd has gone to his resting place, he no longer has to worry about where to sleep.

With this story al-Hāshimī was taking his first step into the world of story writing. The second story he published was also about

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1. Al-Hāshimī, "Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qaṣaṣiyya, p.143.

penniless tramps. It is called "Hikāya Qadīma"<sup>1</sup> (An Old Tale) and is related in the first person. The tramp is worried about his torn clothes and is ashamed to walk in the main streets; he is worried that he has no money at all. Fortunately he finds a coin on the pavement and happily picks it up. This will not solve his problems or pay his debts, but at least it will provide him with a cup of coffee. After enjoying his coffee he discovers that the coin is false. There is nothing much in the story except for the description of life in the poor quarters of the city. However it does indicate the direction which al-Hāshimī was to follow in many of his stories. When a year later, in 1958, he tackles the same theme it is in a more developed way in "Tarīd"<sup>2</sup> (Rejected). The story is also told in the first person. Here the writer gives some indications of the cause of his character's destitution. His father has been killed by the Italians, and his mother has died of starvation, and he has become the heir to the historical political and social oppression that has taken over his society. He is now a beggar and he even feels bitter at his fellow beggars who reject him. But the homeless hero of "Nagham wa-Layla Sāmīta"<sup>3</sup> (A Melody and a Silent Night) finds a friend who allows him to stay with him in his room. But the problem with his friend is that he stays out late

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1. Al-Hāshimī, "Hikāya Qadīma", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qasasiyya, p.245.

2. Al-Hāshimī, "Tarīd", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qasasiyya, p.131.

3. Al-Hāshimī, "Nagham wa-Layla Sāmīta", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qasasiyya, p.137.



at night and our hero is forced to wait outside the door until his friend returns. On seeing him waiting late at night, an old drunkard of a musician who lives next door allows him to wait in his room, offering him pleasurable moments when he plays him some music.

A more mature story about this type of character is "<sup>C</sup>Abdū Alladhī Kān"<sup>1</sup> (<sup>C</sup>Abdū, the Man that Was). <sup>C</sup>Abdū is a colourful character. Every day he comes to the cafe with bandages around his leg or arm or neck or forehead, pretending every time that he has just been in a fight in which he has defeated a group of people, finding admiration for his courage and bravery in the customers of the cafe among whom is the narrator of the story. One day, the narrator discovers that <sup>C</sup>Abdū was lying and that these battles were a complete fiction, and this knowledge earns him the permanent enmity of <sup>C</sup>Abdū. It is only a game by which <sup>C</sup>Abdū can create some sensation in his life, and acquire other people's attention and recognition.

Al-Hāshimī has another hero called <sup>C</sup>Abdū in a story entitled "<sup>C</sup>Abdū Yamūt Wāqifan"<sup>2</sup> (Abdu Dies Standing). This <sup>C</sup>Abdū, however, is a man of dignity, who is now a ruined man, crying whenever he remembers his past as a strong powerful man whom everyone feared. When he is taken away by the police for disorderly behaviour, he shouts at them that he is a dead man, but that he has died an honourable death, that he died standing.

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1. Al-Hāshimī, "<sup>C</sup>Abdū alladhī Kān", 3 Majmū<sup>C</sup>āt Qasasiyya, p.91.

2. Al-Hāshimī, "<sup>C</sup>Abdū Yamūt Wāqifan", 3 Majmū<sup>C</sup>āt Qasasiyya, p.257.



In this story, which was published originally in 1968, the writer seems to be lamenting the disappearance of these types of homeless and jobless characters from society after the change in the fortunes of his country.

One of al-Hāshimī's best character stories is called "al-Nās wa-al-Dunyā"<sup>1</sup> (People and the World), where we meet Uncle Muṣṭafā, an elderly cheerful man who works as an usher and who is always seen riding his bicycle and stopping every now and then to pick up something and continue riding. These actions are accounted for by Muṣṭafā's curious habit of collecting discarded items of rubbish: old empty cans, a cloth, a nicely shaped stone, anything that comes his way he collects and stores at home. Despite the protests of his wife he refuses to abandon his instinct for hoarding other people's rubbish. He believes that everything can come in handy one day.

The trouble with Uncle Muṣṭafā is that he is afflicted by a deep sense of insecurity, the insecurity of an ordinary Libyan who has been through difficult years of poverty, starvation and wars.

The horrors of the war with the Italians are also depicted in some of his stories:

"The noise was getting louder and louder, masses of people running through the narrow alleys. An atmosphere of fear and horror threw its shadow on everything. Even the land of our village seemed to express its dismay and anger: the wind blew dust and shook trees causing a rushing sound which filled the air, intermingling with other noise. From time to time

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1. Al-Hāshimī, "al-Nās wa-al-Dunyā", 3 Majmū'āt Qasasiyya, p.5.

distinct sounds emerged: children crying, women wailing, dogs barking. The sunrays struggled, trying to penetrate through clouds of dust. People muttered rebelliously: 'The Italians! The Italians!'"<sup>1</sup>

His war stories serve as tribute to those Libyan freedom fighters, their spiritual power, their heroic feat, glorifying the struggle of the ordinary people and showing the will of the Libyan character when faced with the ordeal of an invasion.

Al-Hāshimī's weakest stories are those that are filled with many characters. An example of this is a short story called "<sup>C</sup>Awdat al-Rijāl al-Arba<sup>C</sup>a"<sup>2</sup> (The Return of the Four Men) which tells about the solidarity and comradeship between the workers on a building site. When one of their colleagues is denied his daily wage because of illness, they share with him their wages. The story is a documentation of the exploitation the workers suffer at the hands of the constructors. Apart from noble feelings, there is not much in terms of artistic presentation.

Al-Hāshimī usually uses colloquial language in his dialogue with care and consideration. In his earlier stories he sometimes uses colloquial language even in the narration and description. This hinders the flow of the story and makes it difficult for the reader who is not familiar with colloquial Libyan. However in his later works he abandoned this method.

From his earliest stories and throughout his career as a writer, al-Hāshimī remained faithful to his conceptions and ideas, writing

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1. Al-Hāshimī, "Ṣurākh fī Qaryatinā" 3 Majmū<sup>C</sup>āt Qaṣaṣiyya, p.281

2. Al-Hāshimī, "<sup>C</sup>Awdat al-Rijāl al-Arba<sup>C</sup>a", 3 Majmū<sup>C</sup>āt Qaṣaṣiyya, p.201.



simple stories about simple people, usually cheerful and good-natured and straightforward characters. He remained consistent even in his treatment and style: there has been very little change or development in the way he writes his stories or the way he treats his characters, maintaining his own individuality as a writer who has not been influenced by the styles of others. Kāmil al-Maḡhūr noted in his introduction to one of al-Hāshimī's books:

"He does not borrow his style from the great story writers of the East or West; he does not borrow their characters, and you cannot find a direct link between him and any other story writer."<sup>1</sup>

The only weak signs of influence evident in his stories are those of the Russian story writers such as Gorki, whom al-Hāshimī is fond of imitating with his tramp characters, and Chekhov: we see al-Hāshimī repeating the same situation as in one of Chekhov's stories entitled "Misery", and modifying it to suit a Libyan setting, calling it "al-Ḥayāt Tajurruḥā <sup>ʿ</sup>Araba"<sup>2</sup> (Life Drawn by a Cart). In both stories we see a cabdriver finding in his horse the only being to whom he can speak and communicate his sorrows.

Whatever the limitations and shortcomings of al-Hāshimī's stories are, his authenticity and his passionate love for the toiling people of his country, and the fact that he is one of the pioneering writers

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1. See the Introduction by Kāmil al-Maḡhūr to Bashīr al-Hāshimī's book al-Asābi<sup>ʿ</sup> al-Saghīra, included in 3 Majmū<sup>ʿ</sup>āt Qaṣaṣiyya, p.197.

2. Al-Hāshimī, "al-Ḥayāt Tajurruḥā <sup>ʿ</sup>Araba", 3 Majmū<sup>ʿ</sup>āt Qaṣaṣiyya, p.41.



of the realistic story, give him a prominent place in the history of the Libyan short story.

Yūsuf al-Sharīf started publishing his stories in 1958, a year after al-Hāshimī published his first story. Their close association and friendship must have had some influence on their writings, for they both tackle the same themes, share the same concerns and have a similar passion for writing simple stories about those simple people who live in the back streets and poor quarters of Tripoli. They entered the world of short story writing with identical views and the same artistic sensibility, adopting the same approach and method in writing their stories. But, unlike al-Hāshimī, Yūsuf al-Sharīf has not remained faithful to the same method and treatment: in his recent stories he departs from the old path of simple narration and clear-cut situations and characters, and begins to experiment with more complex situations, employing a different style and depicting a world haunted by fear.

The first collection containing his earlier stories appeared in 1966, entitled al-Jidār<sup>1</sup> (The Wall) which won him the third prize in a literary competition arranged by the Ministry of Information and Culture in 1965. Here he introduces a narrow world of the people who live in the back alleys of Tripoli with

"superficial, stereotyped characters, where nothing is revealed about their intimate private lives, or their own characteristic features."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Yūsuf al-Sharīf, al-Jidār, (Tripoli 1966).

2. Aḥmad <sup>c</sup>Atiyya, Fī al-Adab al-Lībī al-Hadīth, (Tripoli 1973), p.64.

They are mostly sketches about life in a back street in Tripoli, where the writer is mainly concerned with presenting life as it happens, introducing people in their daily domestic activities. There is little in terms of analysis or deep perception of their sufferings or their hopes, dreams and inner feelings. These stories are akin to journalistic stories describing social habits and patterns of life when people congregate and sit for hours in front of the local shop drinking tea. Little quarrels take place between neighbours, between husbands and wives, fathers and sons, all told superficially with little insight. We also see fathers beating their sons, and husbands beating their wives, and the people of the neighbourhood treating the outcasts and misfits cruelly, all told with no sense of irritation or dismay, as if this is in the nature of things. Sometimes the events portrayed are introduced as if they are acceptable: the writer obviously condones such behaviour, or at least he does not seem to see the ugliness in all this cruelty. The reader is irritated not by the behaviour of the characters but by the attitude of the writer. A sadist in a story called "al-Qiṭṭa"<sup>1</sup> (The Cat) beats his child for no reason, attempts to strangle the cat and beats his wife every day with a stick. However, he is not introduced as the monster he is but rather as a humane loveable character. The only two stories in this book that escape the superficial treatment are "al-Jidār"<sup>2</sup> and "al-Ṭarīq".<sup>3</sup> The first

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1. Al-Sharīf, "al-Qiṭṭa", al-Jidār, p.101.

2. Al-Sharīf, "al-Jidār", al-Jidār, p.69.

3. Al-Sharīf, "al-Ṭarīq", al-Jidār, p.37.



deals with the social gap created by the new oil wealth. However, what diminishes the total effect of this story and prevents it from achieving a better artistic result is the fact that the writer has cluttered a story of less than a thousand words with far too many characters. A further weakness in "al-Jidār" which undermines the impressions he wishes to create in the mind of the reader about the central character, a social climber who has left his old social group, is the way in which the character is treated by his former friends. The writer wishes to show that his friends are rejecting him, but he could have done it far more effectively by a subtle portrayal of a lack of communication, rather than by creating a situation where his former friends insult him. By having the central character insulted in this manner the writer creates sympathy for him, precisely what was not intended.

In "al-Tariq" the writer demonstrates his ability to understand the agony of an elderly porter who hauls his hand-cart to deliver apples from place to place, while he himself has never been able to taste an apple, because he could not possibly afford one. He also dreams of the day when he can afford to buy a beast of burden to pull the cart for him. The man is portrayed in his total helplessness and even when he falls and the apple boxes fall out onto the road nobody seems to be concerned about his plight. He gets up, and in a dignified manner he continues his journey:



"He puts a hand to his forehead: it is red. The pain increases and his legs begin to give way. He looks into the eyes that surround him: they remind him of those of the Hājj, the owner of the cart. He tears a long strip of cloth off his belt and carefully bandages his head. To the amazement of the eyes that watch him and in spite of the intensity of the pain, he bends forward and pulls the cart. Before any of the passers-by can utter a sound, he shouts at them. 'Make room, clear the road, you who do not know what the road is for.'"<sup>1</sup>

In his second collection of short stories, al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya<sup>2</sup> (The Bare Feet), which was first published in 1975, there is a change of style so marked as to take the stories out of the realm of realism. However these stories are so few, that they will be dealt with in this chapter, for convenience. The simple people of his earlier stories have entered a sinister mysterious world, created by the impact of modernization. His style is no longer simple and straightforward, it has become complex and marred by obscurities and is impenetrable at points.

No longer do we have clear issues, and clear situations. The old impoverished world with all its simplicity and innocence has now disappeared and people are bewildered and frightened by the advance of a modern and sinister age.

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1. Ibid., pp.43-44.

2. Al-Sharīf, al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya, 2nd ed., (Libya 1978).

Some of the stories in his new book belong to the earlier period, among them the title story, "al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya",<sup>1</sup> a realistic story that deals with a clear issue: a confrontation between the workers and their bosses, after the workers become conscious of their rights. We also see a different aspect of modernization in another realistic story called "al-Sūq"<sup>2</sup> (The Market) when an old saleswoman finds out that the traditional market place with all its local colour has disappeared to give way to a newly built supermarket.

But the sinister world reveals itself in full with "Tā'ir al-Layl"<sup>3</sup> (The Bird of the Night) which is a puzzle in the form of a story, depicting a wedding night that has the atmosphere of a funeral. There has been a conspiracy to give Zayna to a strange man, and the story ends with the disappearance of the bride and the murder of the groom. Here is a world of fantasy and distorted reality, a nightmarish situation, conveyed in a poetical condensed language, and from the very first sentence we are faced with a tense situation. The tension increases as the plot unfolds, with the bride falling victim to the conspiracy. The story does not follow an orderly pattern, time loses its meaning, sequences are inverted and the sinister atmosphere lingers on.

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1. Al-Sharīf, "al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya", al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya, p.51

2. Al-Sharīf, "al-Sūq", al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya, p.69.

3. Al-Sharīf, "Tā'ir al-Layl", al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya, p.7.

There is a less artistic presentation in another story "Rihlat Umm al-Diyā"<sup>1</sup> (The Journey of Umm al-Diyā) which is written in the same symbolic style, with the same vagueness. Here we see a woman called Umm al-Diyā wait fifty years for the return of her absent son who promised to take her to a country where the sun never sets. Tired of waiting she decides to go for him. There is no indication what the country of the ever-shining sun signifies, or what is intended by the fifty years of waiting. There is a great deal of poetry but very little in terms of a short story.

"Al-Kilāb"<sup>2</sup> (The Dogs) introduces another nightmarish situation, when dogs seem to have sprung from nowhere, attacking the house of a little boy and his mother. The story does not say much about the boy and his mother but it reveals a state of mind of a writer looking for a metaphor to grasp the essence of an age full of fears and insecurity. "Al-Rajul Yamūt Marra Wāhida"<sup>3</sup> (A Man Dies Only Once) is a story that has a clear sense of purpose; although it is written in a realistic style, it nevertheless depicts the same sinister world, when a man is put through an intensive interrogation. The man happens to be a poet, and the writer takes us on a journey with his thoughts, his solitary confinement, presenting through these interrogation sessions the collision between two forces: that of the interrogators

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1. Al-Sharīf, "Rihlat Umm al-Diyā", al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya, p.13.

2. Al-Sharīf, "al-Kilāb" al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya, p.19.

3. Al-Sharīf, "al-Rajul Yamūt Marra Wāhida", al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya, p.23.



and that of the poet who represents what is good and noble in the human heart. And through a wide range of emotions and images the writer introduces the wealth of moral power and the rich resources which a lonely helpless man can possess and use in his defence against oppressive powers. A man dies only once, so let it be an honourable death. Here is a man who has a cause and is fighting real enemies, but in "Qisṣa Maqtū<sup>c</sup>at al-Ra's"<sup>1</sup> (A Headless Story) the man falls victim to his own hallucinations. He has a wife whom he loves, he has a house, he has a car, yet he is haunted by nightmares, and is incapable of enjoying his day off like any other person. While driving his car aimlessly, some sort of phobia overcomes him. The streets of the city become a battle-field filled with bullets and mayhem and people beating him up. While all this is taking place in his mind, we are left with the sense that this is a fantasy which could become real. Even when he dies he does not escape the fears by which he is terrified and he is doomed to relive them again. In "al-Rajul al-Ākhar"<sup>2</sup> (The Other Man) the main character in the story is walking happily in the streets only to find himself being followed. He cannot see why anyone should want to follow him as he has no enemies, nor has he committed a crime to deserve such treatment. No matter how much he tries to lose his pursuer he cannot; sometimes he even finds the man arriving before him at a place to which he has

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1. Al-Sharīf, "Qisṣa Maqtū<sup>c</sup>at al-Ra's", al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya, p.37.

2. Al-Sharīf, "al-Rajul al-Ākhar", al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya, p.97.

run, as if his pursuer has multiplied. He decides that instead of running away from him he will confront him, and at this point the other man becomes frightened and turns away. This is a very promising story, spoiled unfortunately by an artificial ending.

Having explored the social life of the alleys in his earlier stories, Yūsuf al-Sharīf discovers other areas of human feeling in his later stories. He is still experimenting with structure and style; although he does not seem to have arrived at a fixed pattern, he has nevertheless found a more suitable mode for his creative sensibility.

There is plenty of room for improvement in his style and treatment, as well as in his attitude and outlook, which is far too gloomy. His power in writing the poetical, suggestive sentence has not been fully exerted throughout his stories. It appears as if these poetic passages are used for their own sake, rather than as a contribution to the whole structure of the story. Poetic language should be a means by which a writer may enrich his narrative rather than an end in itself.

Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī is a younger writer, who began writing in the late Sixties, bringing a certain freshness to the Libyan short story. He is more concerned with the essence of the situation than mere accurate reporting, he chooses the indicative situation rather than the everyday occurrence. Coming from the south of Libya, the land of the Tuareg tribes, he began writing stories about the people he knows best, the Tuareg, and their land, the desert. Most of the realistic



writers deal mainly with life in the city, but Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī focuses on the life of the desert tribes. He describes their daily struggle against a hostile environment, their customs, the wealth of their spiritual life, the constant dangers, their hopes, their joys and sorrows, their urge for adventure, and their concept of honour and courage, as well as other aspects of their nomadic life.

In 1974 he collected some of his stories and published them in a book under the title al-Salāt Khārij Nitāq al-Awqāt al-Khamṣa<sup>1</sup> (Praying Outside the Five Prayers). It contains twelve short stories, of which seven deal with the desert life of the Bedouin tribes. The title story<sup>2</sup> depicts a tragic situation when the land of the Tuareg is flooded. After a long period of drought, their joy at the rain turns to panic. When a young woman is caught in the flood, she takes refuge on a small hill surrounded by water where no one can reach her. People are helpless to do anything but to pray to God to save her, realizing that the hill will soon be covered by the water, and Tamīma will soon meet her fate: there is no chance of rescuing her. Then comes al-Dāmūmī, a man known for his courage and remarkable deeds. He makes the attempt to rescue the woman whom he loves. It is a story about the confrontation between man and nature, a wild, hostile and brutal nature. Al-Dāmūmī makes his desperate attempt amidst cries and prayers, forcing his way towards the hill, pitting his courage and

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1. Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī, al-Salāt Khārij Nitāq al-Awqāt al-Khamṣa, (Tripoli 1974).

2. Ibid., p.17.



willpower against the power of the current. He manages to reach Tamīma on the hill, where they are united. Here al-Dāmūmī is allowed to talk to his beloved, whom he was denied in marriage. In spite of the fact that they are now surrounded by flood and threatened by death they agree to marry and assert their will over that of the tribe and over their hostile environment. They will marry not according to the hypocritical conventions of society but according to the law of nature. They spend the night together making love. The next morning, before the hill is covered with water, al-Dāmūmī attempts to reach safety with Tamīma on his back. Unfortunately he is injured in the process and dies as a result. Although his victory is not complete al-Dāmūmī is far from defeated, for he has rescued his love after having, at least in his eyes, married her. The fruit of their love is realized in twins who will carry his name after his death.

In this story, as indeed in many of his other stories, Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī goes directly to the heart of the situation, trying to capture the essence of it, portraying a truthful picture of people in the middle of crisis, describing vividly the conditions they live under, analysing their fears, hopes and superstitions. The writer divides this story into small sections like the movements of a symphony, giving every section a title. A first is called "The Beginning", when Tamīma is caught in the flood; the second, "The Beginning of the Beginning", where he goes back to events prior to the flood, describing the season of drought. The third section is entitled "The Fire and the Smoke", and so on, devoting every sequence of the story to a particular

event. Each movement follows the other as the rhythm heightens and drops again, creating an atmosphere of suspense until it arrives at its climax and returns in anticlimax. But the writer attempts to put too much into the story and this exhausts his narrative. However in the end he succeeds in giving a real insight into life threatened by tremendous danger and describes vividly the faith and determination with which these people cope with difficult situations.

He tackles the same theme in another story entitled "al-Qurbān"<sup>1</sup> (The Sacrifice) where a drought hits the land of the Tuareg and lasts for two years. Uncle Khalīfa, a deeply religious man, leads the people in prayers for rain, and slaughters some of his sheep to give a big entertainment for the reciters of the Quran and the prayers seem to have been answered as rain all of a sudden begins to pour down. The people are jubilant and happy, the happiest being Uncle Khalīfa himself because he is the instigator of the prayers. But the rain does not stop, and it floods the land. The first victim it claims is Zayna who happens to be the daughter of Uncle Khalīfa himself. A cruel writer perhaps, but it takes a cruel writer to reflect the cruelty in man's environment. In Uncle Khalīfa, al-Kūnī introduces a very lively character who has great capacity for loving other people and is generous and kind to children. This makes his tragedy all the harder for the reader as well. Furthermore,

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1. Al-Kūnī, "al-Qurbān", al-Salāt Khārij Nitāq al-Awqāt al-Khamsa, p.79.



the tragedy does not make him lose heart or faith in a greater cosmic justice: he is the embodiment of the good qualities of those desert tribes. In this story, as well as in others, al-Kūnī afflicts his central character with tragedy in order to bring out the virtues that are planted in the soul of a desert man: faith, courage and determination.

Although this story is in many ways similar to the title story, al-Kūnī does not repeat himself, for it is only another chapter in the life of those people who are caught between the extremes of drought and flood, nature in its most brutal form and man at his most enduring, and a desert God claiming a sacrifice every time he answers people's prayers for rain.

In "Qabl al-Suqūt"<sup>1</sup> (Before the Fall) al-Kūnī tries his hand at another style. The story also deals with desert life, but here he mixes reality with fantasy. The central character is chased by beasts but he cannot recognize what the beasts are, for they look like those he heard of in one of the tribal legends. He seeks refuge in a tree while he imagines that the beasts are interrogating him; it seems as if he has committed some crime against them, and that they want to punish him. But he is not aware of committing any crimes. He imagines that the crime has perhaps been committed by his ancestors and that he has to pay for it now. After spending a night in the tree, morning comes and the beasts flee from the sun. The man

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1. Al-Kūnī, "Qabl al-Suqūt", al-Ṣalāt Khārij Niṭāq al-Awqāt al-Khamṣa, p.123.



is saved. This story, although not a very successful one, allows al-Kūnī to explore other styles drawing on the Tuareg legends and complementing his skill as a realistic writer.

"<sup>C</sup>Azf Munfarid"<sup>1</sup> (Solo Playing) is a powerful short story and indeed probably his best. Unlike his other stories which are crowded with people and events, this is a very compact and succinct story. It portrays a duel between a man and a huge wild bird, a bird of prey, a bird that for many days has been terrorizing the people of the encampment, attacking their sheep, and attempting to kill their children even, forcing them to panic and take refuge in their tents only to come out under cover of darkness when the bird is gone. Our hero is away during these events and returns to his family to learn of the situation. He takes his rifle and goes out to kill the bird. But the bird is not as easy a target as the man has hoped, and it attacks the man fiercely, trying to kill him. The man takes refuge under a cliff and fires his bullets one after the other, but every shot misses. With only one bullet left he decides to expose himself to the bird and when it attacks him he fires his last bullet, waiting until the claws of the bird are just above his head.

He is injured in the process and falls down, but the bird is killed. Whether our hero is fatally injured we do not know. The story depicts a moment fraught with tension, suspense and drama. The writer modifies his style to suit the occasion, using short sentences and phrases to highlight the confrontation.

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1. Al-Kūnī, "<sup>C</sup>Azf Munfarid", al-Salāt Khārij Nitāq al-Awqāt al-Khamsa, p.63.

"Al-Ghūl"<sup>1</sup> (The Ghoul) is dedicated to showing the poverty under which these tribes live, where a basically decent young man is turned into a criminal because of poverty and the ill treatment he receives from a wealthy man whom he serves. Because of his crime, the tribe nickname him "The Ghoul". It becomes clear in the story that the criminal is not the ghoul, the real ghoul is poverty, hunger and injustice, which turns an ordinary simple and goodhearted man into a criminal. Al-Kūnī is able to demonstrate that even the Tuareg, simple as they are, are not free from the affliction of class, and the invidious distinctions it creates.

A less important story which also deals with the hazardous Tuareg life is called "al-Khurāfa ʿalā Ṣalīb al-Dhuhūl"<sup>2</sup> (The Fable on the Cross of Bewilderment), where a child is chased by a hyena. The word "cross" in the title seems strange and remote from the situation the story is describing.

The seventh story to deal with Tuareg life is entitled "al-Khayba"<sup>3</sup> (Frustration). It tells the story of the son who leaves his desert life to live in the city, and the conflicting loyalties it creates between his old society and the demands of his new life.

The other stories in this book are devoted to general issues and causes: female emancipation, the political struggle against the old corrupt regime, the worries and concerns of urban people.

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1. Al-Kūnī, "al-Ghūl", al-Ṣalāt Khārij Niṭāq al-Awqāt al-Khamsa, p.79.

2. Al-Kūnī, "al-Khurāfa ʿalā Ṣalīb al-Dhuhūl", al-Ṣalāt Khārij Niṭāq al-Awqāt al-Khamsa, p.101.

3. Al-Kūnī, "al-Khayba", al-Ṣalāt Khārij al-Awqāt al-Khamsa, p.157.

This collection is not his only contribution to the short story: he is now preparing another book where many of the stories are dedicated to describing the lives and times of the Tuareg and their land, a land which has left a lasting imprint on his personality as a writer and determined the colour of his contribution to the modern Libyan short story.



## Chapter Seven

### THE ANALYTICAL APPROACH

<sup>c</sup>ABD ALLĀH AL-QUWAYRĪ - KHALĪFA ḤUSAYN MUṢṬAFĀ

A further development in the Libyan short story came about when the emphasis in the story started gradually to shift from the outside world to the internal world of the character, from national socio-political causes to the individual's own place in society and his conflict with traditional forces within this society; it followed the general change in the people's mentality. The whole nature of Libyan society began to be transformed with the impact of the oil revenues; the cultural impetus had to shift in direction and modify its structure and a new reality brought about new concerns and anxieties. As the familiar poverty receded, and the standard of living improved, the poor who figured largely in Libyan writing had now to take a secondary role, and to give way to a new type of character with more complex concerns, and new philosophical and intellectual preoccupations; thus the intellectuals emerged and became major characters in more recent fictional works, enabling the writer to communicate more sophisticated ideas and concerns which he would have found difficult to convey through his old type of character. The appearance of the intellectual in these stories is also due to the widespread programme of education in the last two decades, whereby the educated man became part of society and not an invisible minority, as was the case in older times. However, the

intellectual is still treated in these stories as an alienated character and not as an integral part of the society.

Writers, therefore, started moving away from the realistic approach, experimenting with more complex structures and patterns of expression. The realistic approach appeared to have outlived its usefulness and become inadequate in dealing with the new situation; even its explicitness, its clear-cut issues and orderly world seem, in the light of new developments, to have oversimplified the complexities of the human mind and human nature, and the focus had to be shifted from the outside world, to what goes on inside the mind. The external event is only important in terms of the impact it makes upon the human mind, the thoughts, the images, the associations it evokes; the focus, therefore, is centred on the process of inner discovery, the interior monologue, the symbolic event. This projects the inner experience of a character, concentrating mainly on the conflict between the external reality and individual consciousness, between the individual and the forces of oppression in society, with the social message implicitly conveyed.

One of the earliest writers to start experimenting with this analytical approach in the Libyan short story is <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī. In 1957, he returned to Libya from the country of his birth, Egypt, whence his family had fled the atrocities of the fascists in Libya in the mid-Twenties. Since his return he has made a valuable contribution to the cultural life of his country, becoming one of the most prominent exponents of contemporary Libyan writing, with six



collections of short stories to his credit as well as a large number of plays and articles. He was born in a village in Middle Egypt and finished his higher studies in the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University in 1955, and after graduation he began writing short stories and publishing them in Egyptian journals. These stories which he later collected and published in a book entitled Hayātuhum<sup>1</sup> (Their Life) were mainly about life in the village of his birth, depicting the Egyptian farmers way of life. They were very much influenced by the school of social realism, but the realistic approach was only a stage in his development as a writer, for once he was back in Libya, the inclination to find a new pattern of expression began to have a great pull on him. In his case realism proved to be an inadequate medium of expression, as he was born and brought up away from his country of origin.

Although he was intellectually aware of the trauma suffered by his countrymen he lacked the intimate experience of social life in Libya. This prevented him from adopting the realist approach to his stories about Libyan life. When he wrote his second book of short stories, al-<sup>c</sup>Īd fī al-Ard<sup>2</sup> (The Feast is on Earth) he attempted to reflect some aspects of social life in Libya, but he failed, the title story being an expression of noble thoughts about some unfortunate children who had to work while others were celebrating the

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1. <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, Hayātuhum (Tripoli 1960).

2. Al-Quwayrī, al-<sup>c</sup>Īd fī al-Ard, (Beirut 1963).

religious feast. But the external description and the realistic treatment could not go deep beneath the surface of things. The whole book would have been a total failure had not the few analytical stories, such as "Bāb al-Janna" (The Gate of Heaven), demonstrated the writer's remarkable skills in exploiting the analytical approach. In his third book of short stories Qit<sup>c</sup> a min al-Khubz<sup>1</sup> (A Slice of Bread) he shows more control of the analytical story, concentrating mainly on the inner world of his characters, and the social message is conveyed in a more subtle and refined way, drawing on the wealth of his own experience. The title story in this collection "Qit<sup>c</sup> a min al-Khubz"<sup>2</sup> can serve as a good introduction to the world of <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, because it reveals, more than any other story, his method of writing, his concerns, and his technique. In the story we see a writer in the privacy of his own room, isolated from the rest of the world in complete solitude, sitting at his desk intending to write a story, with blank sheets in front of him, a pen in his hand, boiling with tension and anxiety, but with no ideas in his mind. He does not know what the story should be about, he only sits there expectantly awaiting inspiration; he jots down some lines about the cold outside and the charcoal fire inside him and he stops. Could the smell of grilled meat coming

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1. Al-Quwayrī, Qit<sup>c</sup> a min al Khubz, (Tripoli 1965). The stories in this book were later included in his book Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra (Libya 1975).

2. Al-Quwayrī, "Qit<sup>c</sup> a min al-Khubz", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.224.



from the window be the answer to his dilemma? Is there anything to go on about? Asking himself what the smell signifies, he answers: "I am looking for the smell of immortality",<sup>1</sup> He is a very ambitious writer, but the idea dies there and then. He feels angry with himself at not being able to continue writing, and tries to breathe some life into the same idea by asking whether immortality has any smell. After posing such meaningless questions he jots down some silly lines about the dignity of work and how immortality can only be obtained by work. He seems to have noticed that he is pursuing a dead end, so he goes back to the subject of writing, whispering to himself: "writing is my life".<sup>2</sup> His salvation, or what seems to be salvation, comes when he hears a child calling his mother; here is an immortal subject, motherhood, child, birth, life, everything is there. But the writer in the story loses interest, and a fight breaks out between the mother and the father who is angered by the cries of the child. The sharp, nervous, brief conversation comes to an end, but not without affecting the mind of the writer, reminding him of the world of his own childhood.

A quarrel between a man and a woman concerning a child is brought to life again, revealing the tremendous hatred and vindictiveness they bear each other. The reader can only assume that the writer is talking about his own parents because he does not specify. The

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1. Ibid., p.224.

2. Ibid., p.224.



story ends with the writer still in his dilemma, his indignation with the world, and a description of the stuffy room, the leftovers of bread and cheese, the cold outside and the fire within him, and the loneliness of a writer in the middle of the night. It is only too easy to identify al-Quwayrī with the writer in the story.

Al-Quwayrī is a lonely writer, and is very conscious of his loneliness; it torments him. The most dominant theme in his analytical stories is loneliness, alienation, and estrangement; most of them are written in the same manner as that adopted by the writer in the above mentioned story. Al-Quwayrī does not approach his writing with a prepared plan for the story he is about to write, or an already conceived plot or situation or character. He does not write a story to portray some significant event, but usually starts from a moment of tension or restlessness, with an urge to explain himself to the world; communication is difficult between people so he resorts to writing as a means by which he can communicate with his fellow man.

A large number of his stories start from the same point, where the main character is always boiling with anger. There is hardly any story where the character is not on the point of explosion:

"He feels his blood boil, a hot pulse coursing through his veins, his heart is pounding against his chest."<sup>1</sup>

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1. <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, "al-Zayt wa-al-Tamr", al-Zayt wa-al-Tamr, 3rd ed., (Libya 1980), p.9.

This is a typical description of the feelings of most of his characters; a mind fraught with tension.

In many cases it is an intellectual retreating to the security of his own room observing the world from the keyhole. It is an intense moment, a moment of crisis and dilemma, a moment that has its psychological and social implications when the character is caught up in a situation suspended between the past and the present, between childhood and manhood, between an old world he runs away from, and a new world in which he cannot find his proper place, between the realities of everyday life and the fantasies of his dreams. He becomes a miserable victim of frustration, depression and, above all, loneliness, a grim and hard-pressing loneliness, seeking salvation in the power of his imagination.

Al-Quwayrī puts himself outside the framework of the conventional world, a position from which he derives his strength as well as his weakness, his strength in being able to see with a critical eye the distortion and corruption in society around him, and his weakness at seeing it from an angle which alienates him from the values and concepts of his society. He subsequently suffers from a sense of estrangement and lack of communication with others, which stamps his stories with melancholy and despair. He is in a state of spiritual and psychological exile, falling back on his own resources, rejecting the outside world and retreating to a world of his own creation, in which he curses those who cannot understand his sufferings. He plays a solo melody, although with different



variations. His characters are always under strain, suffering anxiety. A vein of existentialism runs deep through most of his analytical stories. He shares with existentialist writers their insistence on personal freedom and emancipation and their attitude of rebellion against established values and existing institutions; like them, he too is angered by the triviality of life, and shares with them the feeling that others can only be viewed as additional burdens and is preoccupied with the present moment. This can be seen in his frequent use of terms like "existence", "nothingness", "meaningless".

What saves his stories from being merely the expressions of the vanity and absurdity of life, as is often the case with the works of the existentialist writers, is his deep conviction of his mission as a writer, for he is always conscious of the social and economic factors which contribute to the state of things. His sense of alienation is not a cosmic or universal condition, it results from the advance of the distorted values of commercial society, and he seeks to express through his stories his sense of shock at these simple bedouins and provincials who have suddenly, with the discovery of oil, become somehow different. For him the whole society has fallen victim to the hysteria of commercialism, when all things can be bought and sold without regard to ethical codes. That is not to say that he is a moralist in the strict sense of the word, but he despises commercialism which destroys the innocence and integrity of a person, and despises the change in people's attitudes, their weakness and their blind love



for material possessions. He finds it difficult to communicate with people of a commercial mentality because he cannot speak their language. He can therefore only retreat into his own inner world, living in constant conflict with theirs, a state of mind which gives his stories a colour of their own, and gives his language a sharp edge and an unmistakable sense of immediacy, like the signals coming from a sinking ship, sending an urgent call for rescue.

In all his stories, as well as in his other creative works, al-Quwaryī reflects a restless, rebellious soul searching for a better home, and a more humane world.

The lonely man retreating to his own room and brooding about the world is depicted in many stories, "Al-Layl"<sup>1</sup> (The Night) does not only tell of the darkness of night but also of another darkness which engulfs the relationships between people preventing them from seeing one another:

"He has known them for a long time but whenever he tries to enter their world he comes against a solid wall preventing him..."<sup>2</sup>

So he withdraws to his own depressing room, feeling that he is constantly followed by invisible men. He reflects on the casual conversations he had had during the day with other people, when hidden enmities sometimes rose to the surface, as in the case of a man who started addressing him in harsh insulting language:

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1. Al-Quwayrī, "al-Layl", Sittūn Qissa Qasīra, p.407.

2. Ibid., p.407.

"You are a lonely man, you have no place here, go back to the place you come from, for when you die no one will remember you,"<sup>1</sup>

He is reflecting, to a certain extent, the personal plight of the writer when he first returned from exile and found difficulty in integrating.

The plight of the lonely man is more intensely dramatised in another telling story entitled "al-Mustanqa<sup>c</sup>"<sup>2</sup> (The Swamp) when he is not only bored with others, he is also bored with himself, depressed and saddened by the stagnant situation he finds himself in, remembering with a vengeance those people who gaze at him all the time with hollow eyes, until he develops a habit of staring back at them, entering into a contest of aggressive looks, unable to establish a healthy relationship with people around him. Even the owner of the café he goes to, and whom he has known for five years, still does not know his name. But he also hates the curiosity of his neighbours, and flees to his own room seeking some comfort in the bottle.

"Al-Misyada"<sup>3</sup> (The Trap) depicts almost the same state of mind. The central character knows that somehow he is responsible for the situation he is in, he has walked into the trap himself, nobody has pushed him. He compares himself to the mouse in his room; there

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1. Ibid., p.409.

2. Al-Quwayrī, "al-Mustanqa<sup>c</sup>", Sittūn Qissa Qasīra, p.397.

3. Al-Quwayrī, "al-Misyada", Sittūn Qissa Qasīra, p.370.

are plenty of leftovers, but the mouse chooses the piece of cheese in the trap and is caught. It is true that people have become greedy and self-centred and deserve his contempt but he recognises his own contribution to his misery. The character is addressed by an acquaintance:

"You always walk as if you were swimming, people see you, but you do not see them...."<sup>1</sup>

In the privacy of his room he screams at them, at the images of the people who try to interfere in his life: "Leave me alone!"<sup>2</sup> He is an intellectual who feels alienated, frustrated, disgusted with himself and with the whole world:

"He would not say anything, but the smell of the rat would penetrate his nose, he then would feel the urge to vomit...."<sup>3</sup>

The revulsion in this story belongs to the philosophy of a western existentialist writer but it is now set within a Libyan context. This is the same revulsion as that in a story entitled "Wajh fi al-Zilāl"<sup>4</sup> (A face in the Shadows) where the narrator is again faced with those aggressive hostile people gazing at him. He can only think of them as sandstorms; they can not harm him, but they can still agitate him and stir up enough dust to cling to his clothes and stick to his eyelashes:

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1. Ibid., p.371.

2. Ibid., p.376.

3. Ibid., p.378.

4. Al-Quwayrī, "Wajh fī al-Zilāl", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.364.



"I was one of them, many times I felt rejected by them, but before they rejected me I rejected them, I have become the first to reject them."<sup>1</sup>

The battle is between two worlds, his world against theirs. Protected by the four walls of his room he wages his little war against the distorted values and concepts by which they abide. Even the man who approached him showing some interest in his accommodation problem and offering to help him turned out to be a deceiver who wanted to extract some money from him.

In "al-Aṣābi<sup>c</sup> al-Qaṣīra"<sup>2</sup> (The Short Fingers) he gives some practical reasons for his disillusionment with the world of other people, the commercial society. The lonely man in this story has made attempts to integrate into society, and functions from within it; he becomes a married man with the concerns of family and children, but these concessions do not seem to have made the necessary impact, and his disillusionment increases:

"People have changed, changed a great deal, that is what caused me to stay at home, I do not want to see anyone of them. My children and my woman are enough for me. As for others, they are mere rogues, none of God's creatures would behave the way they do. May God curse them."<sup>3</sup>

The man who causes the narrator's anger and resentment is his brother-in-law, who is only interested in material possessions, putting out his short stubby fingers to whatever comes his way.

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1. Ibid., p.366.

2. Al-Quwayrī, "al-Aṣabi<sup>c</sup> al-Qaṣīra" Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.393.

3. Ibid., p.396.

In "Rajul bi-lā Jawhar"<sup>1</sup> (A Man with no Essence) the writer portrays a character who represents all the values of commercial society, a businessman who only looks for new bargains. This man is also a womaniser who invites women from other countries in order to deceive them. He lives in luxury in a mansion with servants, but with no essence. He depicts him as a machine devoid of any human touch, telling those people who accumulate wealth how empty and hollow their lives are.

In commercial society people are left with no guidance, and the hollow man sets the example for every other person to follow. He is the hero of the epoch, and people who refuse to believe in this false Messiah are rejected. The catchword in commercial society is "acquire", and hands are constantly stretching out to grab. The writer illustrates this in a story entitled "Wujūh Khalf al-Shubbāk"<sup>2</sup> (Faces behind the Window) where the cashier in some financial department can only see people extending their hands to take the money and going away.

In such an atmosphere establishing relationships becomes an impossible task. In a story entitled "Liqā' <sup>c</sup>alā ghayr Maw<sup>c</sup> id"<sup>3</sup> (An Unarranged Encounter) we see how the main character becomes frightened at a sudden encounter with a man whom he reckons is watching

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1. Al-Quwayrī, "Rajul bi-lā Jawhar", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.383.

2. Al-Quwayrī, "Wujūh Khalf al Shubbāk", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.317.

3. Al-Quwayrī, "Liqā' <sup>c</sup>alā Ghayr Maw<sup>c</sup> id", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.308.



over him. When their eyes meet the narrator greets him and tells him that he is involved in a big financial project. This is a lie, but he knows that it is what people respect. The narrator was on his way to visit a friend but he now fears lest the man should find out about this visit. The writer does not elaborate, does not tell us why he should fear, and what the nature of the visit is. This is a characteristic weakness with some of al-Quwayrī's stories; in the intensity of the moment he forgets to give the reader some vital information about his character or the motives behind their actions or feelings. This leaves the story with an essential part missing, and renders it vague and obscure.

The social message in these stories is implicitly conveyed, but sometimes the social and economic problem becomes the centre of the story contributing to the loneliness of the character.

Such is the case in a story entitled "Washmāt"<sup>1</sup> (Tatoos) when the lonely character decides to step out of his isolated world and join the human race, but cannot. He is condemned to lead a lonely life because of social and economic factors. He wants to marry but cannot afford to do so:

"What can I do? There is nothing I can do, I cannot find a flat, and I have no money. My salary is not enough even to keep me, so how could I marry?"<sup>2</sup>

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1. Al-Quwayrī, "Washmāt", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.402.

2. Ibid., p.405.



The loneliness of the young man in "<sup>C</sup>Urūq al-Dam"<sup>1</sup> (The Arteries) is not an intellectual illness, he is merely a simple village man, who becomes alienated when the poor living conditions in his village drive him to look for work in the city and he becomes prey to the corrupting forces in the city. Similarly the central character in "Lahazāt min al-Ghurba"<sup>2</sup> (Moments of Estrangement) becomes prey to a heavy feeling of loneliness and estrangement when he comes to the city and finds nobody waiting for him. But the intellectual alienation remains the dominant theme in al-Qawayrī's stories, because he cannot escape his concern about his own position as an intellectual in a rapidly changing society. His stories therefore bear the imprint of his own plight as a writer whose advanced outlook puts him some distance away from other members of society.

In a short sketch entitled "Rihla Qaṣīra"<sup>3</sup> (A Short Trip) al-Qawayrī describes his problem. He assumes the role of a doctor examining the narrator in the story and warning him:

"Try to take some rest, laugh and smile, why worry? The world will not go according to your command, so leave the world as it is, and go with it as it goes, be like the rest of the people."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Al-Quwayrī, "<sup>C</sup>Urūq al-Dam", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.350.

2. Al-Quwayrī, "Lahazāt min al-Ghurba" al-Zayt wa-al-Tamr, p.102.

3. Al-Quwayrī, "Rihla Qaṣīra", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.379.

4. Ibid., p.38.

This is the writer addressing himself, but he cannot be like the rest of the people, he cannot let things stay as they are; he is committed to change. He conveys through his writings his vision for a better world, a more just and humane world, and that is why he dedicates a number of his stories to children, because they are the basis of the better world. Through these stories he shows his compassion for them, for their innocence as well as their thoughtfulness, with great understanding and faith in their power of perception as well as concern for the maltreatment they are sometimes subjected to.

In a story called "Bāb al-Janna"<sup>1</sup> (The Gate of Heaven) the child is portrayed on the day of his father's death. Everyone neglects him and treats him as a nonentity, everyone thinks that he is below the level of understanding. While his father is dying, his family ask him to go out and play, but the child is the one among all these people who will be affected more than any other person by the departure of the dying man for he is the nearest to him, yet everyone wants to keep him out of it. The child instinctively knows that something strange is happening, and conscious of the danger besetting his father, he refuses to obey their orders, insisting on being near his father. Once he sees them putting his father in the coffin he becomes certain that his father is going to be buried in the graveyard, and screams and tries to stop the people taking his father's body away.

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1. Al-Quwayrī, "Bāb al-Janna", Sittūn Qissa Qasīra, p.170.



This is a moving story, told with deep insight and understanding of a child's psychology, demonstrating the power of a child's instinct and his ability to perceive and understand.

In "Aḥzān Ṣaghīra"<sup>1</sup> (Little Sorrows) we see a very sensitive child who can appreciate nature, the movement of the grass, the singing of the birds, the colour of the leaves falling from the trees. However today he is not in the mood to hear the music of the universe because his heart is full of violent music; he is angry at the way his father treats him, and at the attitude of his mother who stays silent while his father beats him. But somehow he feels that the punishment he received today was justified, for he himself had that very day bullied an orphan child. The writer demonstrates the strong emotions of a child showing that cruelty can only produce cruelty. There is much brutality in the way people treat children in al-Quwayrī's stories, but there are also moments of affection and kindness, in stories such as "Fulla"<sup>2</sup> (Jasmine), "Ṣaqī<sup>c</sup> taḥt al-Jild"<sup>3</sup> (A Chill Beneath the Skin), "Ibtisāma lan Tamūt"<sup>4</sup> (The Smile Never Dies), "Ya <sup>c</sup>Aynī <sup>c</sup>alā Ummih"<sup>5</sup> (My Sympathy for his Mother), "Lam Yūlad"<sup>6</sup> (He was not Born). These are all stories that express people's

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1. Al-Quwayrī 'Aḥzān Ṣaghīra', Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.165.

2. Al-Quwayrī, "Fulla", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.189.

3. Al-Quwayrī, "Ṣaqī<sup>c</sup> taḥt al-Jild", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.181.

4. Al-Quwayrī, "Ibtisāma Lan Tamūt", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.296.

5. Al-Quwayrī, "Yā <sup>c</sup>Aynī <sup>c</sup>alā Ummih", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.323.

6. Al-Quwayrī, "Lam Yūlad", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.144.



love for their children, anxiety for their future, and the fear that something might happen to them, although this love is, on many occasions, marred by narrow-mindedness and ignorance which makes them misunderstand their children and underestimate their emotions and feelings.

Most of al-Quwayrī's stories are told in the first person, whereby he allows himself the opportunity of explaining himself. By identifying himself with the narrator he can engage in a dialogue with himself, drawing on his crisis as a writer, a thinker, and an intellectual, in a backward society. He can also express his rejection of the negative aspects and the social defects around him, showing his great potential as a writer capable of gaining more refinement and sophistication as he matures by age and experience.

Khalīfa Ḥusayn Muṣṭafā is a writer who represents the latest stage of development in the Libyan short story. When his first book of short stories, Sakhab al-Mawtā<sup>1</sup> (The Noise of the Dead) was published in 1975 he was recognised as a highly talented short story writer, who could bring subtlety and richness to the Libyan short story. He crystallised all that had gone before him and created an authentic Libyan short story which incorporated different techniques and introduced a new pattern in writing. In his stories he turns his attention to the inward turbulence of the human mind, revealing the hidden emotions. Although there is a great deal of psychological

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1. Khalīfa Ḥusayn Muṣṭafā Sakhab al Mawtā (Libya 1975).

speculation and analysis in his stories, similar to that of al-Quwayrī, Khalīfa Ḥusayn Mustafā usually goes beyond the psychological study. The character in his stories is introduced as a unique entity, a complex world which cannot be explored by one method only, so that he uses a technique where he crosses the border between fantasy and reality, between illusion and fact, between dreams and events, between the visible and the invisible, mixing in his style the magic of fantasy, the flair of poetry, and the savage music of an approaching disaster. His sentences are nervous, tense, restless, like the clapping of the wings of a bird forging a way through the storm, in which all landmarks have been obliterated. The characters are left in the middle of nowhere searching hopelessly for escape. There is anger, frustration, the explosion of latent emotion, and despair, resulting in ugly deeds such as murder, rape or suicide.

He writes stories that are populated by people who are already dead despite the fact that they are still walking around, in a style meant to convey the cracking of human bones under the pressure of the giant foot of outdated conventions and traditions. These are stories meant to serve as cries and screams against the fate that befalls these people, at the hands of a dehumanising social code that has outlived its times.

Khalīfa Ḥusayn Mustafā does not portray things as they are, he is always in search for things that exist beyond what we see and hear, because there is more to life than that. Sometimes what we see and hear are only the distorted image of the real thing, a falsification



of it, so the writer takes it upon himself to search for the true nature of things, for the real picture behind the false mask. A man, in his stories, can become merely a statue of clay, and the woman appearing on the balcony can suddenly turn into a corpse:

"Every morning the clay statue repeats his monotonous game, he slips into a dusty suit and pats his head, then emerges into the street, surprised each time at how constrained he is, that is why we see him contriving arguments with walls and vehicles, he fixes his gaze on balconies, the balconies are reflected in his eyes, and he explodes with fright when he discovers that in every balcony there is a body of a dead girl."<sup>1</sup>

Mustafā does not follow any fixed formula in his stories, yet he can always confine himself to the moment he is depicting, exploring its depths and bringing out all the hidden elements in it. It is like the moment in a dream, when a world full of images, visions, and ideas, is evoked, and conveyed with great force and intensity, displaying deep insight and understanding of the workings of the human mind, trying all the while to see the event from the inside, skillfully using symbols, metaphors, and poetic visual images, which are all woven into the tissue of the story. He is able to introduce a sharp and acute perception of the world around him. Mustafā borrows his material and elements from the real world and builds a new world unfamiliar to us, and then takes us on a journey of discovery and

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1. Khalīfa Ḥusayn Mustafā "Tawqī'āt 'alā al-Lahm" Tawqī'āt 'ala al-Lahm (Tripoli 1975), p.53.



adventure introducing us to this unknown world, exposing the hidden forces and revealing hidden truths.

When writing about al-Tikbālī, Khalīfa Husayn Muṣṭafā explains his concept of the short story:

"The story is a beginning with no end, a question with postponed answer, and internal dialogue, and a step beyond familiar things, the ready-made analysis, and the out-dated solutions we borrow from other times. The story is a nervous, savage departure to a far-away destination, and once it reaches it, it should go beyond it. Finally, the short story is a journey alongside the road of the possible and the impossible; henceforth the story gains the right to seek life in its higher and finer shape. Life that is adequate to meet man's needs and demands, and which, therefore, is a vision of the future."<sup>1</sup>

Although Muṣṭafā remains faithful to his concept of the savage journey, and his vision of the future, he offers very little hope for those searching for their future. Nevertheless he is mostly concerned with the fate of his characters and never bothers to relate accounts of the past, only in quick flashes so as to illuminate the present moment.

His stories usually start with the character realising that he is locked up in a situation whence there is very little chance of escape. This is usually a situation not of his making or caused through any fault of his, but one is imposed upon him; it is a

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1. Muṣṭafā Dhākirat al-Kalimāt, (Tripoli 1980), p.29.

moment of consciousness, a bitter and painful understanding of his plight. This realisation usually comes when a disaster is approaching, and looks almost unavoidable, as in the case of a woman who realises on her wedding night that she is forced to marry a man other than the one she loves.

His situations are usually inspired by social oppression, and sexual repression, when social conformity becomes a strong force that crushes people's hopes and dreams, usurps their lives, destroys their individuality and prevents them from fulfilling their basic human needs.

Although the focus in these stories as indeed in many other stories by Libyan writers is centred on the clash between the individual and those repressive forces, between tradition and modernity, most of these stories are not merely about social issues. The social condition in these stories becomes the human condition, even the universal condition where the story reflects the human predicament as a whole, and the social forces that crush the individual can be identified with any oppressive power in human experience. The intensity with which the writer communicates his stories makes them powerful enough to project wide implications, and lend a wider meaning to the conflict they portray. The social problem here is only an entrance to more complex issues, to the distorted relationships between people and the misrepresentations of the real values of life due to hypocrisy and deformed perceptions, as a result of which people are moulded to the requirements of a certain pattern of life inherited from different times or imposed by prevailing conventions and traditions.



The dehumanising process is evident in the title story of his first collection, Sakhab al-Mawtā<sup>-1</sup>, where the two male characters suddenly come out of their graves, and immediately start quarrelling about the naked woman who enters the graveyard. Both of them want her to himself and is ready to fight his rival to the end. A policeman, the guardian of social values and virtues, hears the noise in the graveyard and hurries to maintain law and order. Once he sees the naked woman he forgets his role of maintaining law and order, and can only think of obtaining the naked body for himself. The next morning the policeman is found murdered, half-naked. The fantasy world and the real world are entangled, and the picture of sexual repression is powerfully conveyed.

In "Haqībat al-Dhikrayāt"<sup>2</sup> (The Briefcase of Memory) we see a writer sitting in a café gazing at the shadow of a passing woman, contemplating a subject for his next story, when he is approached by the hero of one of his stories, who tells him;

"I am the hero of your story. I died on a bitterly cold winter's night, and I could not find anybody who would volunteer to take me to the graveyard. I have grown tired of lying on my back and waiting in vain, so I stood up and started roaming the streets, and when I saw you, I thought I knew you."<sup>3</sup>

The hero of the story is looking for a hearse, but the writer decides to take him personally to his grave:

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1. Muṣṭafā, "Sakhab al Mawtā", Sakhab al Mawtā, p.17.

2. Muṣṭafā, "Haqībat al-Dhikrayāt", Kharītat al-Ahlām al-Sa<sup>c</sup>īda, (Tripoli 1981), p.15.

3. Ibid., p.24.



"From the café, the awkward procession started. The dead man was walking at the front, while the writer followed him bending his head, and carrying his suitcase of memories."<sup>1</sup>

The writer has created a bleak picture of misery and wretchedness. What remains for the writer to do is to accompany dead people who restlessly roam the streets to their graves, to their final resting places.

They are people who have lost the essence of life a long time ago, and they have become mere shadows, mere ghosts. The dehumanising forces are not clearly identified in the above stories, but there are instances in other stories when they show up in illuminating light, stories where the distorted relationships between people is the dominant theme, where love, and sex are devoid of their human element, where marriage becomes some sort of a savage rape, where women are tormented and brutally treated while men themselves become the victims of the same process. Many stories feature a man attempting to make love to a corpse, showing in the strongest possible terms that if the system kills the woman, it also dehumanises the man. In "al-Ḥarīq"<sup>2</sup> (The Fire) the distorted relationships created by a hypocritical social system are fully exploited. There is a moment when <sup>C</sup>Abd-al-Fattāḥ feels the biological need for a woman, his body is on fire, so he runs to a

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1. Ibid., p.24.

2. Mustafā, "al-Ḥarīq", Kharīṭat al-Aḥlām al-Sa<sup>C</sup>īda, p.25.

house where he meets an old man and asks immediately for the hand of his daughter in marriage:

"<sup>C</sup>Abd al-Fattāh left the old house half-naked with a thin and little yellow-faced woman under his arm."<sup>1</sup>

He throws the woman on his bed and he starts roaring, he jumps on top of the woman, he stops roaring and starts singing, until he successfully accomplishes his mission. He then remembers that he does not know the name of his wife, and when he turns to ask her he finds that the woman has been dead for a long time. He was making love to a corpse, and his task thereafter, is to find a cure for the stench that comes from the dead body with which he is to spend the rest of his life.

This is a nightmarish situation, but somehow bizarre, with bizarre characters, told with irony but with an element of sympathy, exposing the corrupt social system. The same world is depicted in stories such as "Tawqī<sup>C</sup>āt <sup>C</sup>alā al-Lahm"<sup>2</sup> (Signatures on Flesh) and "al-Lu<sup>C</sup>ba"<sup>3</sup> (The Game).

There are many Libyan short story writers who have dealt with arranged marriages, condemning the practice and bringing out the ugliness of it, but Muṣṭafā was the first to approach it from a different angle. Unlike other writers who complain and protest and express their condemnation and rejection, he only portrays it

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1. Ibid., p.31.

2. Muṣṭafā, "Tawqī<sup>C</sup>āt <sup>C</sup>alā al-Lahm", Tawqī<sup>C</sup>āt <sup>C</sup>alā al-Lahm, p.51.

3. Muṣṭafā, "al-Lu<sup>C</sup>ba", Tawqī<sup>C</sup>āt <sup>C</sup>alā al-Lahm, p.45.

as an example of the absurdity of human life, and uses irony and sarcasm to highlight his point.

In "Mawḳib al-Ṣurākh wa-al-Maṭar"<sup>1</sup> (Procession of Screams and Rain) the old man suddenly decides to marry again. As he is very wealthy he can go to the father of the most beautiful girl and offer him the price he wants. They bring him the bride, but the frail old man cannot survive the strains of the first night; he dies, and as they put him on a donkey to take him to his grave, the donkey runs away with the body. The absurdity in the story does not consist of philosophical reflections of life, it is life itself reflected in the story. This story does not lack humour, but it is sardonic and grim humour, it is black humour.

Mustafā is not a moralist, he does not preach or pass comments, he does not demand sympathy for his characters, and he is rarely anxious to offer hope or solutions, being mainly concerned with depicting the distortion in human relationships, resulting in a world devoid of warmth and filled with depression and wretchedness which leave incurable scars on the mentality and psychology of the inhabitants.

In some other stories we see how people are driven to madness, in "al-Rajul alladhī Yadḥak"<sup>2</sup> (The Man who Laughs) we see how the main character of the story, in order not to die of boredom and

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1. Mustafā, "Mawḳib al-Ṣurākh wa al-Maṭar", Kharīṭat al-Ahlām al-Sa<sup>c</sup>īda, p.45.

2. Mustafā, "al-Rajul alladhī Yadḥak", Kharīṭat al Ahlām al Sa<sup>c</sup>īda, p.5.



depression, explodes into hysterical laughter all of a sudden while standing in the middle of a busy street:

"He cannot now turn his back and run towards those lost times. Time now is different, time now gives you everything you want except laughter, it gives you money and nightmares, and obliges you to put a new mask over your face every day."<sup>1</sup>

The reference is clearly to the post-petroleum era in Libya and the yearning is for those innocent times before wealth and commercialism, where people did not have to wear masks every day.

Madness is also the fate of the character in a story entitled "Wahdahu Kāna Bi-lā Ra's"<sup>2</sup> (He was Alone, with no Head). In a society where everything is decided for you, when you are left with no options concerning your own life, one is not required to have a head, and the character of the story discovers after living for many years that he has been born with no head.

In "Hayth Tasquṭ al- Zilāl"<sup>3</sup> (Where the Shadows Fall) the main character after long years of deprivation suddenly finds himself invited to sleep with a woman. When he is alone with her he finds that he has lost his potency and goes insane as a result. A similar fate is in store for the main character in "Baqāyā Rajul"<sup>4</sup> (The Remains of a Man) who is married to a woman many years junior to him

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1. Ibid., pp.11-12.

2. Muṣṭafā, "Wahdahu Kāna bi-lā Ra's", Sakhab al-Mawtā, p.63.

3. Muṣṭafā, "Hayth Tasquṭ al-Zilāl", Sakhab al-Mawtā, p.35.

4. Muṣṭafā, "Baqāyā Rajul", Tawqī'āt alā al-Lahm, p.7.

and on his wedding night is unable to perform his duties as a husband and becomes mad.

In a male-dominated world potency becomes equal to life itself, and when it goes, life may just as well end. The woman's side of the story is given in "al-la<sup>c</sup>na al-Khāmisa wa-al-Thalāthūn"<sup>1</sup> (The Thirty-Fifth Curse) where the female character spends her life house-bound waiting for the man who will come to marry her. She becomes desperate when the thirty-fifth year passes without anything happening, and she becomes hysterical, tearing off her clothes, hallucinating and protesting against the fate that has befallen her.

The other themes that recur in Muṣṭafā's stories are also related to his main theme of sexual repression and social conformity. It is concerned with time, for he recognises that any social order is not itself destiny, but can be changed, and is in fact changing rapidly. But can one's life wait for the change? Is it not true that an individual life can easily be ruined before the change happens? Here is another dilemma which Khalīfa Ḥusayn Muṣṭafā excels in tackling.

In "Mu<sup>c</sup>allim al-Ḥisāb"<sup>2</sup> (The Maths Teacher) the teacher resists social conformity, awaiting an opportunity to marry on a more sound basis and better conditions than those offered by the existing social environment, but he suddenly finds out that the years have passed and

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1. Muṣṭafā, "al-La<sup>c</sup>na al-Khāmisa wa-al-Thalāthūn", Sakhab al-Mawtā, p.71.

2. Muṣṭafā, "Mu<sup>c</sup>allim al-Ḥisāb, Kharīṭat al-Ahlām al-Sa<sup>c</sup>īda, p.28.



he is still a bachelor. The bitter realisation comes to him when he receives his letter of retirement. Even his pupils have become responsible men with families and children while he is facing a lonely retirement.

The central character in "Kharīṭat al-Aḥlām al-Sa<sup>c</sup>īda"<sup>1</sup> (A Map for Happy Dreams) is condemned to a life of trivialities, his sole task being to write "deceased" on the files of civil servants who have died recently. The realisation that comes over him is that he himself has in his own life time become "deceased", for he is unable to fulfil any of the hopes, dreams, and ambitions that he once had; while life goes on he is stuck in his job, doing meaningless work. He tries to rescue what remains of his life by leaving the job.

The main features of Khalīfa Muṣṭafā, therefore is that he usually presents a grim and spiritless world, the sudden tragic sequence of events following each other. He expresses futility in the world of relationships, focussing on the interplay of social forces, following the process of inner discovery, telling his story with subtlety. The irony in his tone does not always wipe out the sympathy for his characters. Social oppression and sexual repression are at work in the background of most of his stories, enriching the conflict in his stories, creating wider implications and perceptions and giving his stories a thematic unity and powerful effect.

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1. Muṣṭafā, "Kharīṭat al-Aḥlām al Sa<sup>c</sup>īda", Kharīṭat al-Aḥlām al-Sa<sup>c</sup>īda, p.45.



In spite of the sophistication and refinement in his stories, there is plenty of room for improvement, although the shortcomings in his stories are trivial beside his achievements. The story does not always end where it should end. He sometimes exhausts his narration by pursuing an already finished story. Sometimes he starts from a high-pitched tone allowing the reader no time to adjust himself to the situation, and to gradually absorb what the writer has to tell him. Sometimes the vagueness and obscurity render his stories impenetrable mysteries and instead of adding to the story they detract from it and make it meaningless. <sup>however</sup> But these <sup>exceptions</sup> are very minor ~~faults~~ and he still offers the Libyan short story a standard of writing that equals any international standard.

Although the approach which focuses on the inner feeling is now gaining popularity among the new writers in Libya, the results are not always so felicitous. For this approach requires, more than any of the above approaches, a certain degree of subtlety, refinement and understanding of human behaviour, as well as a highly artistic style, which the new writers must work hard at, until they are able to reach the standard set for them by the two earlier writers

<sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī and Khalīfa Husayn Muṣṭafā.

## PART THREE

### THEMES

The Libyan short story stands out as a genuine and sincere medium for reflecting the socio-economic environment of its writers. The rapid changes which Libyan society has witnessed since independence are clearly reflected in the works of the contemporary Libyan short story writer; this makes it necessary to highlight at this stage the main features which characterised the social environment of Libyan society relevant to the period under study, taking into consideration that the nature of the study necessitates a great deal of condensation and some clear classifications of the material and circumstances under observation.

When, in November 1949, the United Nations granted Libya its independence (which was declared two years later, that is on the 24th December 1951) the Libyan people found themselves assigned the difficult task of building a new nation out of the wreckage and ruins and the barren surface of a land blanketed mainly by sand dunes and filled with the mirage and haze of the desert sun. U.N. statistics in 1951 revealed that Libya was one of the poorest and most backward nations of the world or as a book about political development and social change in Libya quoted Prof. Higgins:



"It was in the bottom of the range of income and resources"<sup>1</sup> with a per capita income of less than \$30 per year. Among the population of approximately one million and fifty thousand Libyans at the time, there were only fourteen persons who were fortunate enough to <sup>have</sup> travelled abroad for higher studies and return<sup>ed</sup> with a University degree.

"Not until 1959 were the first University degrees awarded to a graduation class of thirty-one by the only Libyan University."<sup>2</sup>

The nature of the society in this poor and federal desert kingdom was a "typically traditional society"<sup>3</sup> predominately rural and illiterate without any degree of industry or modern means of communication, with only one fifth of the population being town-dwellers, only a small percentage of the land mass could have been made suitable for cultivation whilst even the cultivated parts were in the hands of the Italian community who were left over from the colonial era.

From a political viewpoint the most pressing problem was the onslaught of a new colonialism which the economic situation helped

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1. Prof. Higgins was assigned by the U.N. to report on the economic status of Libya. His findings were the subject of a report, excerpts of which are quoted in Omar al-Fathaly et.al.

Political Development and Social Change in Libya (Lexington, Mass., 1980), p.1.

2. Ibid., p.27.

3. Ibid., p.2.

to install and reinforce. As soon as Libya began to evolve from the fascist era, she found herself under the umbrella of the British and the Americans; she became what was later referred to as a "British pensioner",<sup>1</sup> selling out her newly acquired independence and tying herself down by two military treaties. In fact the government was felt to be abusing the people's feelings and making a mockery of the people's long years of struggle and sacrifices, thus causing great psychological tension in the country. In addition to the grievances created by poverty, reports of Bedouins dying of starvation were always suppressed by the government who thought that it was bad for the national pride. That could have created a dangerous situation had it not been for the simple basic needs of the people as well as the cohesive nature of the Libyan population for there was no distinctive class structure at the time as was the case with many urban societies, and no racial or religious differences. This contributed to one of the most important characteristics of the Libyan personality that kept the people of this vast diverse land together as one entity. There are some other factors as noted by one writer:

"The man in Libya waged fierce battles against desert environment and recurring waves of foreign invaders, but in the face of it or because of it, he was able throughout this struggle to retain his identical and characteristic features."<sup>2</sup>

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1. ~~Ibid., p. 50~~ Jamāl Hamdān, al-jumhūriyya al-ʿArabiyya al-Lībiyya, Dirāsa fī al-juġhrāfiyya al-siyasiyya (Cairo 1973) p. 37
  2. Aḥmad ʿAtīyya, Fī al-Adab al-Lībī al-Hadīth, (Tripoli 1973), pp. 56-57.



The only disadvantage was that "in order to keep his personality independent from any influences, he stayed hostile to change, frightened of adopting new ways of life"<sup>1</sup> making it difficult for any social reform to change the attitudes of the people. This mediaeval outlook was responsible for women being kept in a constant state of backwardness: they were denied educational opportunities, tied to a domestic role, forced to veil themselves at all times.

Against this background the pioneering Libyan writers of the modern era started building the new literary movement with a great sense of responsibility and commitment to the cause of their people: "If there has ever been a virtue we could attribute to the intellectuals of this country, it is their all-out embrace of social realities in order to develop and serve society".<sup>2</sup> Talking about pre-revolution literature in Libya, the short story writer Bashīr al-Hāshimī sums up the main theme that was evident in the Libyan writer's offerings.

"The literary output before the revolution represents a social document, very much aware of life then. It is a document full of signs telling in its condemnation of the past dying regime."<sup>3</sup>

The writer, therefore, felt compelled to plunge himself into the problems of his people, he could not at that stage afford to stay

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1. Ibid., p.57.

2. Kāmil Maqhūr, in the introduction to A.I. al-Faqīh's al-Bahr Lā Mā' Fīh, (Tripoli 1966), p.xii.

3. Bashīr al-Hāshimī, "al-Maṭlūb Tarḥ al-Qaḍīyya biwajhihā al-Ṣaḥīḥ", al-Uṣbūʿ al-Thaqāfī, (Tripoli), 17 November 1972, p.4.



aloof or indifferent. The size of the misery that was there was beyond the capacity of any person, let alone a writer, to escape it:

"There could hardly have been any story or a poem that did not depict this poor working man, struggling in the face of his grim circumstances from dawn to dusk, and having him as a main character. The Libyan writer was in no way engineered by any other external political forces than the passion and deep devotion he usually expresses for his land."<sup>1</sup>

But our hard-working man is not going to enjoy this red carpet treatment by our writer for long. Hardly ten years have passed when a new situation started looming ahead removing our toiling man from his place in the centre of the writers' attention, when all of a sudden, from being classified as a hopeless case as far as economic and social development is concerned, Libya underwent a rapid and dramatic change with the oil discoveries in 1959. In a matter of a few years "Libya became the world's fourth largest producer of crude oil, a rate of growth unknown anywhere in the industry's history".<sup>2</sup> Libya moved quickly from "the status of a capital-deficit nation to a capital-surplus nation, from an aid recipient to an aid extender".<sup>3</sup> The situation left the writer at a loss. The great transformation had now started and the whole nature of the Libyan way

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1. Al-Maqhūr, loc.cit., p.xiii.

2. Al-Fathaly, op.cit., p.21.

3. Ibid., p.21.

of life began to change and the cultural impact had to shift direction and modify its structure; a new reality necessitated new questions and anxieties. The old poverty lessened, prosperity though not universal had changed considerably the standard of living in the country, the opportunities for education were all the time increasing. But the cultural and social upheaval that came with the discovery of oil left a bitter after-taste in the mouth of Libyans as their hopes and expectations were frustrated as the reality of oil-wealth was realized. This cheerful mood that accompanied the news of the discovery of oil was now to give way to disillusionment and fear, strange patterns of behaviour and new moralities, those of the commercial and consumer society were now forging ahead making their impact felt in this land of rural and bedouin people. The Libyan bourgeoisie was now in the making and against it was a proletariat that was now found in the central cities created by the people leaving the countryside looking for work opportunities and in spite of the economic boom, the huts and shanty dwellings were surrounding every city and town.

The crisis was already there, highlighted also by more corrupting aspects of the new life, like the feverish and hysterical atmosphere that was prevailing under the blanket of the Royalist regime when new members of the newly founded class (although the word club is more fitting in this situation) were trying through greed, corruption and the pursuit of self-interest to fill their pots with newly-discovered gold before they were found out.



With the new economic rule determined by individual pursuit, which contrasted with the traditional modes of mutual dependence fostered by the tribal traditions, the ordinary Libyan felt the sense of loss because he was incapable of creating an alternative set of values to replace those he left behind. At the time one could also detect some sense of bewilderment towards the new wealth because they had not earned it. Although it was never suggested that it was immoral to live on something other than one's own labour, what was very much in evidence at the time was a distrust and contempt with which some writers viewed that wealth.

On the political side, there was also the sense of humiliation among the people as a result of the staggering defeat the Arab countries suffered in the 1967 war with Israel. The ingredients of the revolution were actually there boiling in the pot and the moment of eruption was inevitably near.

With the arrival of the revolution<sup>of 1969</sup> there were considerable changes made in all aspects of society. As the political institutions of the Royalist regime were swept away, the demands of writers for political change were met, the foreign presence was abolished, the usurpation of the oil wealth by a small clique became a thing of the past, and the participation of the people in the running of their affairs was realized. However the social changes, first brought about by the discovery of oil, only accelerated, as the movement towards urbanisation intensified. This was mitigated, in part, by the re-establishment, after many centuries, of the Arabo-Islamic



character of the state, and the declaration of the sovereignty of the Libyan people over all aspects of the country's political and economic destiny.

These enormous changes, which in developed countries had taken centuries, and in most developing countries at least a generation, were realized in Libya within a brief span of two or three decades. It is not surprising therefore that the Libyan writer should be so preoccupied with the changes in the social life of his people. This preoccupation is reflected in the themes adopted by writers as subjects for short stories. The overwhelming majority of Libyan short stories are directly involved with portraying some aspect of social change. For the purpose of this study these aspects have been crudely classified into five themes which may fairly represent the most salient preoccupations of the Libyan writer. It is realized, of course, that this type of classification cannot be exclusive, for many stories cited as an example of a particular *Theme*, could well have been better used to illustrate another theme. Many stories illustrate more than one theme, or indeed several. The titles of the themes, each of which comprises a chapter in this part of the study, are in themselves self-explanatory, and the stories contained within each chapter graphically illustrate the social issue in question making any further comment redundant.

## Chapter Eight

### THE URGE FOR PERSONAL FREEDOM

The desire for personal freedom is an important thread running through the Libyan short story. These stories carry a strong element of protest against the constant assault on the personal life of the individual and the unceasing intrusion into his privacy. Writers therefore take a strong position alongside the individual in his confrontation with the community and all the customs, totems, taboos, outdated attitudes and the ideas it stands for.

The form of the short story, due to the necessary compactness of its construction, is the ideal vehicle for portraying such an intense situation as the conflict between self and society.

In "Zawja min Miṣrāta"<sup>1</sup> (A Wife from Misrata) <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī tries to illustrate these conflicting loyalties. His character must choose between the social need to conform with accepted values and traditions, and the demands of his own nature. He yearns for fair and just treatment when faced with the obligation to marry the daughter of his uncle. He is not happy with the whole affair but he tries to convince himself:

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1. <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, "Zawja min Miṣrāta", al-Zayt wa-al-Tamr, 3rd edition, (Tripoli 1980), p.131, it was first published in 1967.



"That is how our traditions are. I just can't abandon the daughter of my uncle."<sup>1</sup>

But sometimes the suppressed self tries to emerge, when he wonders:

"Why does a man of my age have to give in to such practices?"<sup>2</sup>

He knew that his mother would object to such a thought. "But", he says to himself, "I haven't seen her since childhood". He imagined his mother's reply: "Do you think your father would have had the chance to see me?" and he comments cynically

"Well, neither my grandfather or my great-grandfather had the chance to see my grandmother or my great-grandmother."<sup>3</sup>

Is there no end to it all? He cries in his agony. Must we all be victimized by the same blind and cruel traditions. Then he reaches a compromise; he asks to see the face of the girl before he is committed to marrying her. His mother exclaims in surprise:

"See her?! The Prophet save us! You must have lost all your manners, you really have changed."<sup>4</sup>

The dilemma continues, and the question persists in his mind whether he should refuse and rebel. The submerged self is now showing some signs of awakening.

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1. Ibid., p.131.

2. Ibid., p.131.

3. Ibid., p.132.

4. Ibid., p.133.

"Al-Qas<sup>c</sup>a"<sup>1</sup> (The Bowl), also by <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, takes the matter of personal freedom a step further. Here it is not only the family that practises control over the individual's personal life but the larger community as well. The story tells of a man who finds himself a guest in the house of an elderly person. There are other guests coming to dinner, but he is the first to arrive. The time passes without any of the other guests arriving. He is alone in the room with his elderly host, who begins to question him about his personal life as if it were an interrogation: "Why are you not married yet?" the old man asks aggressively. He is startled, and does not know what to say, he only mutters some unintelligible words. But the old man insists, "What are you trying to say?" And then again he urges him to speak: "What are you waiting for?"<sup>2</sup> Once more he tries to find some excuse for not having married yet, wishing that one of the other guests would arrive to save him from this embarrassment.

He then comes up with some sort of answer:

'I haven't saved up enough money.'

'You are well off.'

'But.....'

'Don't complicate things' (the old man interrupted angrily)

'I am just trying to find a way!'

'Why don't you do something!'

'I mean, when I have made some provision for my future first.'

'Leave it in the hand of God.'

'Yes, but one must think.'

'Think? whatever you think, the will of God prevails.'"<sup>3</sup>

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1. Al-Quwayrī, "al-Qas<sup>c</sup>a", Sittūn Qissa Qasīra, p.271.

2. Ibid., p.275.

3. Ibid., p.275.

The interrogation goes on, with the guest on the defensive, and the old man showing no signs of sympathy. The guest pleads for understanding:

"'Circumstances are different now'  
'Different?! In what way?'  
'In every respect, life has changed.'  
'Has changed just for you?'  
'For me and others.'  
'You are the one who ought to change.'  
'I have changed.'  
'You have not.'"<sup>1</sup>

says the old man firmly. He then accuses the guest of being stubborn.

"'You are pigheaded.'  
'I have a soft heart.'  
'Your heart is like your head.'  
'I don't want to see children suffer.'  
'God is merciful.'"<sup>2</sup>

The elderly man represents the old habits and outlook, a society which ignores personal considerations and expects every person to act according to a set of rules that was laid down centuries ago.

<sup>C</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī suggests that this is the way society invades the privacy of an individual's life, where the borders between what is public and what is private is non-existent.

This intrusion is a recurring theme in <sup>C</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī's short stories, "Ṣirā<sup>C</sup>"<sup>3</sup> (Conflict) is set in a lawyer's office, when

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1. Ibid., pp.275-276.

2. Ibid., p.276.

3. Al-Quwayrī, "Ṣirā<sup>C</sup>", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, (Libya 1975), p.253.



an intruder is pretending to be a friend. He says to the man in the office:

"'I know you, I know you better than you know yourself.'

'How come?'

'For ten years I have been watching you, observing every little move you make. I know you inside out.'

'Did somebody assign you this job?'

'I assigned it to myself.'

'But why?'"<sup>1</sup>

The intruder then starts to comment on the lawyer's life style, and the books he reads. He also voices his disapproval of the way he thinks, and the ideas he holds because they are not good for society. The lawyer becomes alarmed:

"You are accusing me of something."<sup>2</sup>

This is not confirmed by the intruder who says on leaving the office, that he will come back and visit him again.

The intruder here is obviously an agent of an established authority in society. And although he said that watching him was a job he had assigned himself to do, perhaps that makes the prospect all the more terrifying. It is frightening when people in a certain society take upon themselves the job of watching others. The visitor has said very little, but had indicated how the lawyer should think, which books he should read, and the kind of life-style he should adopt. The

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1. Ibid., p.253.

2. Ibid., p.257.

lawyer has been left with no margin in which to choose, and no option, except that of being an enemy of society.

In "Tamarrud"<sup>1</sup> (Rebellion), Khalīfa al-Tikbālī, another writer with a strong social conscience, tells of a boy who wants to skip his boyhood and enter quickly into manhood. He thinks that in this way he will escape from his family's harrassment and control of his life. Nothing in his childhood has made him love it. Childhood is not for him a playground, playmates, and funfairs, it was not sweets and toys and joyful times. It was a torment, when he was constantly intimidated and beaten up.

He tried to compensate and assume the role of the man of the house when his elder brother was away. But on the brother's return he was again dictated to, told what to do and where to go. Then came a time when he felt he could no longer bear it.

He refused to obey his family's orders, and rejected his brother's commands. After reaching this decisive step, he leaves the house and against the instruction of his family he goes with his friends for a picnic near the wide-open sea.

The conflict within him is thus resolved, with the natural urge for personal freedom triumphing at the end. And the mention of his trip to the sea is symbolic of his break away and salvation.

These stories were written in the late Fifties and early Sixties, the sense of protest is intensified in later works. Times have

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1. Khalīfa al-Tikbālī, "Tamarrud", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, (Libya 1976), p.7.

changed, the demand for the final emancipation from the claws of tradition has become more urgent and thus the writer's voice has grown louder. Characters such as "the Father" are no longer considered sacred, at least as far as the short story writer is concerned. These characters are looked upon as symbols of oppression. The message is no longer "obey your father" as it once was in the traditional culture. The message now preached in the new writings is "rebel against your father". The father-character has become identified with all the suppression inflicted on the individual throughout his development, thus hindering his psychological development and blocking his emotional needs.

An early story by Yūsuf al-Sharīf published in 1966, called "Suwaylima",<sup>1</sup> describes how it was out of the ordinary for somebody to think bad of his father. Even when he treated his son in a very brutal way as in the case in the story.

"Is it true that I have never loved my father? How was a question like this formulated and how was I able to stand contemplating it."<sup>2</sup>

It has just dawned on him that his feeling towards his father is quite different from the way he is made to believe. For him it was a discovery:

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1. Yūsuf al-Sharīf, "Suwaylima", al-Jidār, (Tripoli 1966), p.123.

2. Ibid., p.128.



"I discovered that I have never loved him, but I haven't hated him either, I was only afraid of him.....  
He was to me a frightful whip. He would whip me for whatever trivial mistake I would make."<sup>1</sup>

Yet the son has to leave his school and work as a typist in order to keep his father who is unable to work as a result of an accident. But in a story called "Wajh"<sup>2</sup> (A Face) written by Khalīfa Husayn Mustafā some years later (1975), the atmosphere is different, the rejection of the father is total.

"I will crush you with my boots, just like a worm"<sup>3</sup>

This is how a father is described addressing his son in the story where the father assumes the divine right to rule over the life of his son, even after he has grown up.

When the father dies, it is not just an actual physical death, but the death of a symbol in his son's heart. The son, who, until that death, submerged his own personality and allowed that of his father to dominate and command. The sorrow the son feels is now mixed with a great sense of relief:

"A tragic smile crosses his face. His eyes glitter, he looks back, and puts his hand in his pocket, taking out a handkerchief, he wipes out the effect of the smile and lights a cigarette, he looks back again.

He was my father, he is dead now, though I still hear his steps tapping over my forehead. He is threatening me still - I will crush you with my boots, just like a worm - I didn't ask why. You have to obey the master of your being.

He quickly disappears in the crowd."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.128.

2. Khalīfa Husayn Mustafā, "Wajh", Tawqī'āt alā al-Lahm, (Tripoli 1975), p.79.

3. Ibid., p.79.

4. Ibid., p.79.

He sums up the life of the father, his misery and his tyranny, in a few words:

"I remember that he was a poor man. He used to lick his sweat and blood and go for days with no food. He used to beat up his child when he was hungry, and later on he divorced his slave-girl and bought a rabid dog. He rode over the back of the dog who started barking feverishly and running, and the man went on laughing. Then the dog jumped in the air. The man died while his slave-girl never ceased crying."<sup>1</sup>

The rabid dog is a reference to the rigid ideas that the father was obsessed with which would spoil his life and the lives of those around him. These ideas are better illustrated in this passage:

"My father died after he killed the dog and a bitch he had found mating. He cut<sup>it</sup> the head of the dog and put it in a basket and went around telling everybody in the streets:

'The head of the dog is in my basket. Your honour has been saved.'"<sup>2</sup>

At the funeral of the father, the son kept laughing, and a man who did not know that he was the son of the dead man asked him to behave and show respect for the dead. The irony of the situation does not end there. The waiter in the cafe said to him:

"You must follow in the steps of your father. You must take up his sword and guard our values."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.80.

2. Ibid., p.81.

3. Ibid., p.81.

But the father did not leave a sword:

"he only left a big stick with which he used to beat my mother, and a dagger with which he used to cut the heads off sinful dogs."<sup>1</sup>

The ugly character of the father is part of an ugly system where people:

"interfere in everything, they count even the air you breathe. They pass judgement on you because you laughed or you wanted all of a sudden to spill your blood and purify it with sewage water."<sup>2</sup>

But it is not always the people around you and watching you who make judgements. In many cases it is something that has been planted in your personality from an early age. And you cannot release yourself from its bondage even when in later years you realize that it is a bondage.

"Oh, let the days of my childhood never come back to me."

This sentence was shouted by a teacher attending a drinking session, in a story called "al-Ghuṣn wa-al-Shajara"<sup>3</sup> (The Branch and the Tree) by Muḥammad al-Shuwayhidī. He shouted it when images of the past come up to him to spoil his moment of fun, and make him feel disgusted with himself and remorseful because he has not kept to the conduct prescribed by his parents. He has betrayed all the

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1. Ibid., p.82.

2. Ibid., p.82.

3. Muḥammad al-Shuwayhidī, "al-Ghuṣn wa-al-Shajara", Aḥzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid, (Benghazi 1973), p.26.



standards, values and moral obligations he was brought up to guard and preserve.

The margin that is therefore left for the individual is very narrow indeed. This is a society where the individual is expected to marry the person who has been chosen for him or her by the family, where love is considered a forbidden fruit, where the child is dictated to and denied the chance for normal mental development. This is a society where the position of the father is always associated with tyrannical and absolute powers. It is no wonder that the writer, who can be considered the most sensitive observer of his society and the ways its machinery works, should have strong feelings about this issue of personal freedom and attempt to convey it in the strongest possible language. There are situations when the direct narrative is enough to carry the message. But then there are cases where the emotion is so strong that a direct narrative is not enough to carry the writer's feelings and he resorts to a more condensed and succinct style as a vehicle for his ideas.

Yūsuf al-Sharīf in "<sup>C</sup>Awdat al-Rajul al-Ākhar"<sup>1</sup> (The Return of the Other Man) which is told in the first person, chooses a dream like style to describe the invasion of the privacy of his central character.

"I heard nothing, but I woke in panic. I looked at the door, which started to open very slowly. I was stunned with fear and didn't utter a word."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Al-Sharīf, "<sup>C</sup>Awdat al-Rajul al-Ākhar", originally published in a Libyan journal and translated in Azure (London), I, 1 (1977), p.19.

2. Ibid., p.19.

The intruder is in the bedroom. To make the strongest impact the writer chooses the bedroom as the setting for the intrusion, because of what it symbolizes concerning privacy and intimacy. After messing with everything in the room, the telephone, the books:

"He took from his mouth his prayer beads which shone with phosphorescent light. He threw it like a professional juggler. He then approached me with extended arms, as if he intended to embrace me. I bent in his direction but suddenly he put his hands round my neck and pressed hard. His eyes, so close to my face, I tried to cry out. In fact I did, but made no sound. I felt choked, I wept but I shed no tears, I tried to break away, but felt as though a mountain was crushing my breast."<sup>1</sup>

The reader might be forgiven for thinking this is a scene from crime-fiction or a passage from the script of a horror film, but in fact it is neither. When the man in the story woke, he felt relieved that it was just a dream, a nightmare. But it was not a dream. A frenzied shiver shook his body when he saw in the mirror that the scratches of last night's assault were there on both his neck and chest. That is when the writer starts to reveal the nature of his character's plight.

The frightful dream has broken the frontiers of the land of dreams to the land of reality and has got hold of his daily life. His thoughts were confirmed when he went to his work and found himself face to face with the man in his dream. There he sat at the desk in

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1. Ibid., p.19.



front of him, holding a file with his name on it, telling him that his record was not a very pleasant one. He shouted at the man in the office

"If I see your face tonight I will kill you."<sup>1</sup>

The person in the dream obviously, represents everything which the writer considers as forces of oppression within his society. As an item of identification the rosary has always been used as a symbol of the religious establishment.

The tyrannical hold society has over the personal freedom of the individual will not die easily. Yet the social reforms introduced by political decision are taking effect, and the grip is no doubt loosening up. The massive educational programme is helping in abolishing the tyranny of the old social order, and changing the attitudes of people towards personal freedom. These attitudes are no doubt a result of thousands of years of oppression and imposed ignorance.

The old poverty was also responsible in part for denying the individual a fulfilled life. The plight of Sulaymān who feels that his life is a copy of one repetitive day in a story called "Yawm Wāhid"<sup>2</sup> (One Day) written in the Fifties by Bashīr al Hāshimī is over because the circumstances that resulted in that plight have now changed. Sulaymān in those days was toiling from sunrise until sunset with no

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1. Ibid., p.20.

2. Bashīr al-Hāshimī, "Yawm Wāhid", 3 Majmū'at Qaṣaṣiyya (Tripoli, n.d. 1980?), p.125.



breaks or holidays in order to support a large family of old parents and small brothers and sisters. He was young but had never experienced joy or happiness only the heavy responsibility that ground his life away.

He cried out in agony:

"Why do we have to lead a life like this.....

There must be some other way of life we don't know of."<sup>1</sup>

But those ways of life are not open to people like him. The only joy in his life are the moments he steals to go to the tavern and drown his sorrows and anxieties. Sulaymān has now an opportunity to lead a better life. He has the chance to further his education. His old people are covered by social security schemes. He will have fewer working hours, holidays and good pay. "Other ways of life" are no longer closed to him and his future life is less likely to be a monotonous repetition of one day being exactly like the day before. But his crisis is far from over. Because as his consciousness increases, his power of perceiving life develops, his range of interests and activities will be enlarged. He has now secured his basic needs in food, clothing, housing, work, medical care, etc., and he now looks for more scope for his life, more emotional and intellectual fulfillment, and that is when the individual in a traditional society finds himself on a collision course with traditional forces and fossilized ideas and attitudes, as some of these stories attempt to illustrate.

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1. Ibid., p.129.

## Chapter Nine

THE EMERGENCE OF AN URBAN SOCIETY

The emergence of an urban society is a favourite topic with some Libyan writers. They have recorded the disappearance of the old ways of life due to sudden changes in Libyan Society as a result of the discovery of oil, the influx of country people into the cities, and the sociological consequences. Attitudes towards age, time and distance are now changing, modern technology is advancing, and a sense of alienation and bewilderment has been created. As the traditional life-style disappears, the anxiety of the people becomes more apparent, for it is only with pain that they can shed those bonds which tied them to the old world and which existed for thousands of years.

A mysterious and sinister new world is being created. It is the duty of the writer of short stories to attempt to grasp what one critic has called the "insecurity of a doomed society".<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest stories to try to capture this mood is entitled "al-Bukā'"<sup>2</sup> (Crying) and was written by Kāmil al-Maqhūr in the mid-Sixties. It tells of the horror of a little school boy on seeing

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1. Patrick Rafroidi, The Irish Short Story, ed. Patrick Rafroidi and Terence Brown, (Lille 1979), p.35.

2. Kāmil Hasan al-Maqhūr, "al-Bukā'", al-Ams al-Mashnūq, (Tripoli 1968), p.131.



his home, and the whole neighbourhood being demolished by a huge, ugly machine to make way for a big, new, modern building: "Umran had never cried as he cried that day. The drops of his tears became mixed with grains of sand, and put freckles on his face"<sup>1</sup> as he watched his old world being cruelly and brutally obliterated in a matter of hours.

"The bulldozer's wide jaws were eating up walls one after the other. Its triangular shaped teeth hauled stones and bricks with ecstasy, and pieces of building material were scattered around..... The wheels of the machine had become just like giant legs striding along with determination, a one eyed monster, a big hole in its front burning with light as it watched its mouth engulfing falling walls and stamping them with its feet. It was opening up a wide path for new high buildings to be built."<sup>2</sup>

All those small houses, the beautifully-designed windows and doors, even the stables and huts were all being ruthlessly wiped out, with no regard for the memories and emotions lodged in them. As the boy watched the machine cut through them as if they were toy houses. Even the privacy of these houses was now invaded, their insides now open for everyone to see:

"And it was not long before he saw the courtyard of the house with its remaining three walls and the interior of the rooms and the green doors. The

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1. Ibid., p.133.

2. Ibid., p.133.

remaining walls were full of cracks and splinters just like his anguish-filled heart. His eyes were shedding tears, mixed with sand..... There were people around him but he couldn't distinguish people's eyes. They were hidden behind a smoke screen of dust. Their voices could not be heard for they were lost in the ensuing crash of masses of bricks onto the ground. Were they trying to keep their tears back? It was as if the machine was walking heavily on his heart among the dust and smoke."<sup>1</sup>

The bulldozer in the story symbolizes all the power and might with which this new urban society is advancing. As for the boy, the machine attracts all his hatred and anger. As a way of expressing his rage:

"He attacked it, but it didn't attack back. He angrily opened his eyes as wide as he could, but it didn't budge or respond. He then moved back, and with all his might he kicked it, in the face with his foot. He felt the pain, but he didn't enjoy the thrill of vengeance. He felt nothing as the bulldozer stood there motionless while he agonized over the terrible pain in his toes."<sup>2</sup>

The writer chooses a tender instrument, a schoolboy, through whose reactions he reveals the emotions and deep suspicion he harbours for the newly emerging world and expresses his sympathy and attachment to the old, disappearing, world.

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1. Ibid., p.138.

2. Ibid., p.145.

In "al-Zayt wa-al-Tamr"<sup>1</sup> (Oil and Dates), <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Qāwayrī treats the same topic from a different angle. He attempts to assess the impact of the emmigration to the cities on the people that live in the country. Relationships between families are deeply affected, and farms, fields, olive groves, vineyards and palm orchards are deserted as everyone leaves for the city to work as porters, delivery boys, caretakers - all non-productive jobs - instead of continuing in their old productive agricultural work. The conflict, as the title of the story suggests, is between the oil that comes from olive trees (which are considered sacred), and the oil that comes from beneath the desert. The writer makes no effort to hide his sympathies. The story begins when a farmer goes to fetch the man whom he usually hires to fertilize the palm trees. But he is not to be found. He is told that the man has gone to work in the city. The following conversation sums up the farmer's problem:

"What will he do in the city? There are no palm trees for him to fertilize.'  
 'He is going to work as a door-keeper.'  
 'But who will fertilize our palm trees now that he is gone?'  
 'No one!'"<sup>2</sup>

Then the farmer remembers the olive trees. He hesitates to ask, but, as if they have guessed what is in his mind, they say:

"Even olives, we can't find people to pick them."  
 "You won't get pickers, even if you offer them half the crop."<sup>3</sup>

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1. <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, "al-Zayt wa-al-Tamr", Al-Zayt wa-al-Tamr 3rd ed. (Tripoli 1980), p.7.

2. Ibid., p.10.

3. Ibid., p.11.



On going back to the house the farmer finds his mother weeping. His brother is standing there insisting that he is going to leave the family and he wants to sell his share of the orchard to go to the city like the rest of the people. It is not only the orchard that is going to be ruined, it is also the family. That is a highly emotional moment:

"He stumbled on the front doorstep. He heard a loud voice, then his mother's voice was affected by sobbing and moaning. They faced each other. He felt his blood boiling and the hot blood pulse through his veins. His heart beat wildly against his rib cage. He asked him

'What has happened brother?'

After his brother had calmed down a little, he muttered something and turned his face away. He replied in controlled tones:

'Nothing'."<sup>1</sup>

But the time eventually comes when he has to tell him of his intentions.

"A minute passed, sharp as a knife, the passing seconds nearly severing his nerves. The pane of glass in the only small window in the room was cracked, bits of paint had been peeling off the walls; his brother turned to him suddenly and said in a low voice, with his head hanging down:

'I told her I am selling my share'."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.14.

2. Ibid., p.15.

And he explicitly gives his reasons. It is no longer good business to keep an orchard when everyone else is going to the city looking for a chance to find an easy job. Olive oil and dates have been their food. The mother cannot get over the idea that life can still go on without olives and dates. The son who wants to sell the orchard enlightens his mother by informing her that in the city market one can get everything from olive oil and dates to sweets and almonds. The note on which the story ends leaves no doubt that the writer meant something very specific by his mention of the "cursed devil";

"He didn't question him any~~more~~. His mother didn't ask who was going to work in the orchard. His salary would suffice. His mother kept quiet and didn't utter a word. He made no reference to what he expected of her, but looked kindly at her, she lifted her head and he saw in her eyes words she didn't wish to voice. He said to himself 'such is the state of the world....separation' his voice rose in spite of himself and he muttered 'God curse the devil.'"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī follows the same theme in some of his other stories when he describes what happens to the man who leaves his village in order to live in the city. When people come from the country to the city they are always an easy prey to exploitation, and, sometimes, even corruption, or, in less dramatic cases, bitterness and disappointment.

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1. Ibid., p.20.

In "al-Sharīkān"<sup>1</sup> (The Two Partners) the man from the village was lucky to find a shopowner who takes him on as a delivery boy and provides him with lodgings in the shop. He is happy to work for no money, valuing the food and lodging. But the young wife of the merchant finds in him a chance to fulfill her sexual desires. She starts asking him to come to the house when her husband is out, saying that he was old and would soon die, and that she would then take her lover as a partner. The message is clear, the city not only exploits the labour of village people, it also wants their souls.

In "<sup>C</sup>Urūq al-Dam"<sup>2</sup> (The Arteries), also by al-Quwayrī, the villager again finds the city job he wants, as a porter in a hotel owned by an elderly Italian woman. The old woman not only wants his work, she also wants his body. She takes him to her room and makes him, for the first time, and against his beliefs and convictions, drink alcohol with her. So once again the corrupting element in the city emerges. The character here is merely a boy, and he gives way easily. Afterwards he feels disgusted with himself and lost. He forgets what he should be doing when he begins the job, but the Italian woman is in no hurry: "Don't worry you will get used to it in a matter of days".<sup>3</sup> Lost innocence is what this village boy gets in return for all the hopes and dreams he brought with him when he left the country.

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1. <sup>C</sup>Abd Allāh Al-Quwayrī, "al-Sharīkān", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, (Libya 1975), p.278.

2. Al-Quwayrī, "<sup>C</sup>Urūq al-Dam", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.350.

3. Ibid., p.358.



In "Laḥazāt min al-Ghurba",<sup>1</sup> (Moments of Estrangement) the fate of the village immigrant is less dramatic. On arriving in the city and losing his way to the place where his relatives live, he decides to return to his village. He feels helpless, strange and alien to the whole setting, and he finds the people in the city uncooperative, unsympathetic, and indifferent.

"He didn't know of any particular hotel he could go to, and then again they might refuse him. He remembered his money, only two pounds. And if he found in the morning that the cost of the hotel was more than the money he had, what was he going to do? Anxiety stormed him. Hesitancy paralysed his steps, his hands trembled, his heart beat very fast. His hands touched the money frequently, then put it back."<sup>2</sup>

Now, perhaps, was the moment he should turn to his fellow men to take him out of his misery. He approached a man in the street, with a slip of paper on which the address of his relative was written

"'Mister'. He stared at the face of the man who stood in front of him, and after hesitating, said 'Excuse me, do you know this address?' Without looking the man shook his head. He didn't read the paper. He didn't attempt to find out who he was. He didn't ask him his name. His legs were unable to carry him. He wished that he could sit down."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Al-Quwayrī, "Laḥazāt min al-Ghurba", al-Zayt wa-al-Tamr, p.107.

2. Ibid., p.112.

3. Ibid., p.113.

Even when, after a long day of searching and suffering he finds his relative, his bitterness remains and the cold reception given to him by his relative increases his disappointment.

Kāmil al Maqhūr, in a story written in the mid-Fifties, long before the economic boom that came with the discovery of oil, treated the same theme with light-hearted humour.

The people of the city were more helpful in those days. On arriving, the hero of "al-Salām <sup>c</sup>alā Mansūra"<sup>1</sup> (Greetings to Mansūra) cannot find work. He then falls ill and stays in hospital for two months. He misses Mansūra, his wife, and his yearning for her grows greater every day. Once he is out of hospital he goes searching for someone to write a letter for him to send to Mansura. He approaches a man sitting at a table in a café, busy reading and writing, who tells him to be off, taking him for a beggar. But the hero of the story explains himself:

"'Do you have a moment to spare, brother?'

.....

'What for?'

.....

'Only a letter. If you could write a letter from me, please.'

.....

'To whom are you sending the letter?'

.....

'I am sending a letter to Mansūra, and asking her how she is'."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Al-Maqlūr, "al-Salām <sup>c</sup>alā Mansūra", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, 2nd edition, (Tripoli 1978), p.119.

2. Ibid., pp.115-116.

The man in the café attempts to find out what he should write in the letter but he keeps sobbing and saying, "Greeting to Mansura", repeating the phrase until he loses his voice.

The story tells us a great deal about the deep loneliness and sense of loss that a villager may experience when he leaves his own environment. It is a story which shows the simplicity and good-heartedness of the villager.

A story written in 1964 by a younger writer, Ahmad Naṣr, is more telling in its all-out rejection of the new urbanization that came with the economic boom. "al-Ṭarīq al-Aswad"<sup>1</sup> (The Black Road) tells of ~~a~~<sup>the</sup> predicament of an old farmer confronted with the changes that make him a victim as the urban society quickly spreads. A network of roads is to be constructed, and one of them is to go through the farmer's land, destroying the best parts of it. The sinister black highway, after taking away his farm, also claims the life of his only son, when the boy, unaccustomed to the restrictions and hazards of the road, and regarding it as a playground, is run over by a car. On going to the market the old farmer finds out that the price of commodities is escalating. Soon they will be affordable only by the fortunate few who can afford the money which they tend to spend in a reckless manner. A shopkeeper comments. "it is petrol, uncle, petrol."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ahmad Muḥammad Naṣr, "al-Ṭarīq al-Aswad", Wa-Taba<sup>c</sup>tharat al-Nujūm (Alexandria 1970), p.90.

2. Ibid., p.94.



These words invoke in him all his grief and sadness. On his way back home he finds a car-crash near his farm, with blood spilt all over the black road.

Every event in the story evokes an impression of detestation and contempt for the emerging society, dramatizing the disappointment and disillusionment that the people in the countryside felt at that time (1964) with the new urbanization.

The hostility with which some of the Libyan writers view the newly-acquired wealth is due to the political establishment and the way the country was being run, where wealth was in the hands of the ruling clique instead of being evenly distributed.

In "al-Jidār"<sup>1</sup> (The Wall) written in the mid-Sixties, Yūsuf al-Sharīf dwells on the issue of the unjust distribution of wealth and the wall it erects between people by virtue of the impact created by the sudden change in people's fortunes.

Overnight "Miftāḥ" becomes a high ranking official in some department. He gets himself a car, and moves house to the rich quarter of the city. He is now a different person from before, due to the sudden change in his social stature. This is how the writer describes his return to visit some old friends in his former neighbourhood:

"A child ran like a shot, crying "Uncle Miftāḥ, Uncle Miftāḥ, is coming!" A small car driven by Miftāḥ made its way through the muddy, narrow road, it was preceded by a group

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1. Yūsuf al-Sharīf, "al-Jidār", al-Jidār, (Tripoli 1966), p.69.

of children, chased by another group trying to cling on its rear. Only one of the children preferred to walk alongside the moving car. Their shouting and crying filled the little street until it looked like a small demonstration. The car stopped in front of the shop of the Hāj̄j. The children moved away a little from the car, staring at it as if they had never seen a car before. For a moment he felt that his legs were not strong enough to carry him. He was confronted with eyes which said that he had no place among these people. Nevertheless he moved, saying hesitantly "peace upon you". Their answer to his greetings was not very clear but they made rather a meaningless murmur."<sup>1</sup>

As he was neatly and smartly dressed he was offered the only chair in the shop. Out of modesty he sat with them on the floor, but they considered it hypocrisy. The place was full of tension, everyone felt uneasy, as if Miftāh was not their same old and intimate friend, more as if he were a stranger. And when one of them asked him about the whereabouts of his new house, he replied shyly "Garden City". Then everyone was certain that Miftāh no longer belonged with them. He belonged to a different and distant world. They felt that Miftāh had betrayed them, and he felt somewhat guilty.

"Somewhere deep inside himself, hatred for himself and those sitting in the shop was overwhelming him, strangling him. He realized things had changed, that he would no longer be able to play a game of cards with them, or be one of the party in the room they rented during Ramadān in which they spent their nights. He had moved away from them."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.71.

2. Ibid., p.73.

He now regretted the impulse that had made him come to visit them. It had become a torture session, especially when one of them had said "It is God who gives",<sup>1</sup> in obvious reference to Miftāh's new status. For him

"the impact of these words was like a knife. Cutting into his flesh, crushing him and turning him into dust."<sup>2</sup>

Even the one who had uttered them felt a deep regret.

"He moved from where he was sitting and looked at the floor. He was afraid lest he should be betrayed by the suppressed tears in his eyes for they were about to brim over, revealing his true feelings."<sup>2</sup>

So it is like the funeral of an old friend whom everyone considers lost.

"He was fully alert to what the following moments might bring about, but the question which he had never expected was the one asked by <sup>c</sup>Ayyād, while offering him the final round of tea "Why did you come, Miftāh?"<sup>4</sup>

An insulting remark comes when one of the group says that Miftāh has come to show them his car.

"His temper was at the point of explosion. 'Why did you come, Miftāh?' The wall was rising higher and higher until it nearly reached the sky."<sup>5</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.74.

2. Ibid., p.74.

3. Ibid., p.74.

4. Ibid., pp.75-76.

5. Ibid., p.76.



The writer touches here on the divisions that occur in society with the crack in its old fabric. The story ends with Miftāh parting company with his friends forever. He is now a member of the "nouveau riche"; he had joined the other camp, the newly emerging class. He has become, in the eyes of his old friends, a class enemy:

"Miftāh rose suddenly as if he had just come out of hell. No one bothered to ask him why he was leaving, and only Sulaymān said "Goodbye" in a cold voice. He started the car engine. When he was behind the wheel the certain conviction struck him that 'he would never come back again'."<sup>1</sup>

In "al-Zāhifūn <sup>c</sup>abr al-Turāb"<sup>2</sup> (Creeping through Dust) by Bashīr al-Hāshimī, first published in 1968, we see how the shanty towns surrounding the city are being destroyed to give way to new buildings. But there are no plans to rehouse the shanty town dwellers. Therefore it is always a sad day in the life of any family living in a hut when the tractor that demolishes the huts comes anywhere near their area.

The story tells of a family that lives in fear that their hut will soon be taken away from them. The wife comes up to her husband whenever she sees a tractor in sight crying, "They will take away our hut!" But before that happens she falls ill and dies. And her husband is now alone to witness the tractor gradually come nearer and

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1. Ibid., p.76.

2. Bashīr al Hāshimī, "al-Zāhifūn <sup>c</sup>abr al-Turāb", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qisasiyya, (Tripoli n.d. 1980?), p.263.

nearer, destroying the neighbouring huts one after the other. He stands there guarding a box containing all the valuables of his late wife. His wife used to burst into tears whenever she saw a tractor destroying the belongings inside these huts: 'I don't want them to break my box'.<sup>1</sup> Now they could take away the hut and evict him, but on no account were they going to break her box. He carefully puts his arms around the box ready to defend it to the last breath. This story concerns itself with the hardships inflicted upon the poor in this period of transition. The story was written in 1968, a year before the 1969 revolution.

"Ilā ayna ayyuhā al-Badawī"<sup>2</sup> (O Bedouin, Where are you Going to?), by Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī, takes place in the same period as the previous story. It describes the impact of this transitional period on desert dwellers, in particular the case of a bedouin who sells his two camels and decides to live in the city.

"He went to the city with his two camels, which were all he owned. When he arrived he asked people how he could get rid of his camels and they showed him the way to the market where he could sell them. He sold them for thirty pounds. He knew he was cheated at this price because he knew the tricks of the people in the cities, but he didn't know how to haggle."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.266.

2. Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī, "Ilā ayna ayyahā al-Badawī", al-Fusūl al-Arba<sup>c</sup> (Tripoli), March 1982, p.82. A translated version also appeared in Azure (London) Vol.I, No.2, (Spring issue, 1978), p.65. The above extracts are from the translation in Azure.

3. Ibid., p.65.

The feeling of being cheated is the first emotional experience he encounters in the city. He also,

"had a strange feeling that unlike anything he had ever known before he felt that he was leaving the desert forever and also that he no longer wanted to sing."<sup>1</sup>

Then the story describes how he deals with life in the city:

"He had even started to suffer from insomnia, a complaint he had never known before."<sup>2</sup>

But the biggest shock is yet to come. This occurs with his first encounter with the authorities in the city. In the desert he had never experienced any direct governmental control, but here government is something tangible, and if you ignore it you are in trouble. And that is what happens to the bedouin when on his fourth day in the city, as he felt tired walking the streets,

"he sat down on a curbstone leaning against the wall. After a few seconds he closed his eyes and fell asleep. Suddenly he woke up, aroused by the noise in the street. Shopkeepers were closing their shops, people were dashing about shouting while others were lining up on either side of the street."<sup>3</sup>

The King's procession was passing by.

"The bedouin didn't bother to move from his place because he couldn't understand what was going on. He was only thinking of the camels he had sold, of a deer which he

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1. Ibid., p.65.

2. Ibid., p.65.

3. Ibid., p.66.



hunted but which had evaded him for a week. He thought of a sad song to break the silence of the desert, and the loneliness of his life. In the meantime, two people were standing near him, one to his right and one to his left."<sup>1</sup>

They were the police, who took him to prison for not showing respect for the King. There he was interrogated and beaten up, and locked in a cell for a few days.

The writer shows how the transition was hostile to the old bedouin. It forced him to leave his natural environment and to come to a place where he was a complete stranger. He lost not only his desire to sing, his sleep and his camels, he in fact lost his freedom. The oppressive political system described in the story, made it impossible for him to adapt to his new situation. The impact is perhaps less dramatic for the younger generation who may have been born and brought up in the desert, but move at an early age to the cities. There is a better chance that they will adapt themselves to the new life. But as another story<sup>2</sup> by the same author tells us, the dilemma in their minds lives on. The conflicting loyalties between the values of the desert and those of urban society are best illustrated when a young man who has already made his home in the town

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1. Ibid., p.66.

2. Al-Kūnī, "al-Khayba", al-Salāt Khārij nitāq al-Awqāt al Khamisa (Tripoli 1974), p.157.

like other desert boys who left their villages, and went to settle in the town to study or to work, receives a letter from his father asking him to come urgently to the village. When he arrives he finds out that his father wants him to take revenge for him on a man who has <sup>u</sup>insulted and humiliated him in his old age. And as he is the only grown up son he must see to it that the man learns his lesson. When the boy fails to act upon his father's instructions because things are different from his father's day when accounts were settled by violent means, his father becomes angry and ashamed of his son, who is at a loss for what to do, except to go to the grave of his dead mother and start weeping.

In "The Windmills of Ali Ben Rahal",<sup>1</sup> one of the short tales which Ridwān Abū Shuwaysha excels in writing, we see a vivid description of how modern society is advancing, as it disturbs the peace of a sleepy Libyan village.

"The shops are filled with cheap goods and gaudy colours, radios, television sets, cameras, axes, shoes, tins of condensed milk, bags of rice, flour and sugar, and Chiquita bananas, sandals from Taiwan and the Libyan traditional kaftans made in Czechoslovakia and Japan. Cages of birds and Ugandan parrots, small birds singing sweetly, blankets from Spain and Italian sewing machines."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Redwan Abushwasha, "The Windmills of Ali Ben Rahal", King of the Dead, (London 1977), p.61.

2. Ibid., p.61.

The dilemma introduced by the new urbanization is that it is difficult not to lose your identity and character when everything around you is imported from elsewhere. Even the traditional Libyan clothes are now being made abroad and the mills that grind away the life of Ali Ben Rahal are part of these contradictions and anxieties. While the new society is making itself seen and felt the old society does not die easily:

"A Donkey, trotting freely, stopped in front of a grocer's shop and snatched a cucumber, the shopkeeper kicked him in the stomach, so the donkey started to trot here and there. A dog walked by without wagging his tail, a wandering cock crossed the road full of himself, uncaring of passing cars."<sup>1</sup>

The central character of the story comes to the village of Ali Ben Rahal to deliver a message to his mother. He tells her that her son Ali has all of a sudden gone mad, and has been taken to a mental hospital. But the messenger cannot explain why the children of the village were dirty and aggressive or why the faces of the village people looked grim. The village was still sleepy but the workers who had been brought from Turkey to demolish old buildings and build new ones are cracking the silence with their axes. It becomes clear at the end of the story that Ali Ben Rahal was a victim of paradoxes and contradictions brought about by the new modernization.

The writer is, however, not only concerned with the wounds and injuries caused by the quick transition. He takes care not to neglect

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1. Ibid., p.61.



the positive aspects of this modernisation, and the impact created by the new social order introduced by the outbreak of the Libyan revolution on the First of September 1969.

In "The Valley Blooms in September"<sup>1</sup> also by Ridwān Shuwaysha, the author looks at the massive agricultural projects instituted as the result of the revolution in order to exploit the oil wealth to raise the standard of living of the ordinary people. In direct language he describes how "the valley", and that is a reference to the countryside as a whole, "is changing and blooming after the 1969 revolution, after centuries of barrenness with just a few wild-pear trees."<sup>2</sup>

The story is told in the first person by a character who expresses his enthusiasm for the advances of the modern age and the progress that is being made possible by this new project. But his mother, representing the old generation, feels some sense of loss at the disappearance of the old world and its ways.

"My mother carried in her, all the love for the old valley, the disappearance of the wild tree made her sad. When the new farmers moved in and changed the face of the valley it filled her with fear."<sup>3</sup>

Some problems of the new prosperity come from the fact that change in attitudes and beliefs cannot match the fast change in the standard

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1. Abushwasha, "The Valley Blooms in September", The King of the Dead, p.23.

2. Ibid., p.23.

3. Ibid., p.23.

of living. The divorce of a newly rich man from his aged wife is a manifestation of his new status. Even if it was considered a disaster by the village people as the story tells us.

But progress has to make its way in spite of those old men and women who,

"stare silently at the tractors that are clearing land for the new farms. They are churning over their old memories of life in the past."<sup>1</sup>

The writer does not elaborate on what was significant about the past which makes them cling to it and all the poverty and barrenness associated with it. But he makes it clear that fear of the advancing technology is the motivation behind many of their reactions, and anxieties.

The central character in "Just Wait"<sup>2</sup> by Ridwān Abū Shuwaysha takes a more positive attitude, perhaps because he belongs to a younger generation. But the sudden improvement in the living standards has reached him only when after he has already become a man, and lived through difficult and hard times as a child and a young man. The story describes his feelings as he sees the good fortune of the new generation who can lead a happier life than the one he had. He feels happy for them.

"Everything around him was full of life. The government blocks of houses were ready for the homeless to move in. Opposite the government blocks splendid huge villas were

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1. Ibid., p.24.

2. Abushwasha, "Just Wait", The King of the Dead, p.39.

being built by rich people. He felt content at the sight of the government blocks, awaiting families who had never settled nor known a roof over their heads."<sup>1</sup>

As for the children he sees playing near him, "this is a happy generation, laughter, a chance to go to school, clothes, how lucky they are."<sup>2</sup>

He stands there, drawing some comparison between his childhood and theirs.

"He envied them" because "in his day things were different. He never knew a house or a school, even the flag was strange. It was British. He wished he were a child again. How hard it is to know you have aged."<sup>3</sup>

He is brooding over his wasted life. But the answer to his old suffering comes like this:

"Wait, wait, you will laugh one day, you will be compensated for the loss of play, childhood and school, when you offer these to your children."<sup>4</sup>

The young are more capable of change and renewal, the new urbanization poses a big challenge, and members of this society, as the short story writer tells us, have no alternative but to take up the challenge.

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1. Ibid., p.39.

2. Ibid., p.40.

3. Ibid., p.40.

4. Ibid., p.41.



Chapter Ten

THE QUEST FOR LOVE

While the poet confines himself to lamenting lost opportunities for love, and the inspiration that is lost with it, in a society that keeps men and women separate, the short story writer takes a more positive stand. He campaigns most strongly to force the collective mind of the community to recognize the right of every member of society to act freely and to be less inhibited when it comes to the question of love and deep emotional involvement generated by love.

Libyan society has always attempted to deny, or at least to stifle this sensitive aspect of human nature. The short story writer takes this issue very much to heart, detecting the harmful psychological effect such denial has on men and women and showing how powerful passion can be terribly destructive without proper outlets.

The short story writer, when writing about love, does not isolate it from the social and economic factors that are usually involved. In the early stories sex was usually avoided, or at least its importance was played down. But in later stories, writers began emphasizing the relation of love and sex within its social and economic context.

The first story in the first book of short stories published in Tripoli in 1957 is about a young man contemplating the life he leads devoid of love. Indeed "love" is the first word in the book:

"Love? Is there a meaning more immortal in all human existence than the meaning of the expression 'love'?"

The twenty-four year old man in "<sup>C</sup>Indamā Yamūt al-Ya's"<sup>1</sup> (When Despair Dies) by Abd al-Qādir Abū Harrūs, has suddenly realized that his life is empty, his existence meaningless, because he has never fallen in love, never tasted what love is. He has read books about it, watched films glorifying it, and heard songs telling how wonderful it is. Yet he has been destined to live his life in a society where he is not given the chance to love. The only way open to him is to daydream. In this way he creates images to fall in love with.

"From behind the window he felt as if something was moving. He hesitated a little, but a wonderful voice, a little, but a wonderful voice, reached his ears, whispering 'love, love, love'. He then stood up, and moved lightly like a passing shadow and a light breeze towards the window, wishing his daydream would come true. But he found nothing. Sad and pale, he returned to his bed, and as soon as he laid his head on the pillow and again held his book, he once more heard the whispering voice coming again, 'love, love'."<sup>2</sup>

The writer, romantic as he is, cannot bear to have his hero stand up for his rights, and fight or rebel. However, he does make him travel all over the world until he is able to taste love, and return preaching nothing but love. The trip is an imaginary one, taken by the writer himself, who, unable to face the harsh realities of a traditional, closed society, turns to dreams.

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1. <sup>C</sup>Abd al-Qādir Abū Harrūs, "<sup>C</sup>Indamā Yamūt al-Ya's", Nufūs Hā'ira (Tripoli 1957), p.13.

2. Ibid., p.22.



In "Sirr al-Anāqa"<sup>1</sup> (The Secret of Elegance), the same author tells the story of a girl and boy, Salīm and Salwā, who have known each other since childhood. They have played together, grown up together, and through the years they have grown fond of each other. But the time comes when Salwā is taken away from Salīm. She is no longer to go out freely, and when she does go out she is veiled and accompanied by her father. The two young are denied the chance to meet or to see each other. Salīm is always seen dressed in his best suit. The mystery behind his elegance is that he lives in hope that one day he will see Salwā again. He wants to look as good as he can and to be always ready just in case suddenly and without previous notice, the moment comes when he sees her. The story records the passive resistance of people who seemingly submit to the fate of society's control over their emotions and feelings.

Love in most Libyan short stories is the result of a brief glance from behind a curtain or veil or a half open door or window. Society denies men and women the chance to meet and mix, it denies them the opportunity to share common interests and develop the understanding that leads to deeper relationships and the emotional involvement we call love. As this chance is denied, the brief look becomes the only alternative to the mutual experience which leads to love affairs as is the case with any open society. The Libyan short story writer, therefore, attributes great power to that brief stolen look which a man

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1. Abū Harrūs, "Sirr al-Anāqa", Nufūs Hā'ira, p.159.

and a woman exchange from behind high walls and closed doors.

Such a stolen glance can kindle the flames of love in the hearts of a man and a woman. Consequently it can alter the whole life of the person involved. This is the case in an early story of Bashīr Al-Hāshimī, written 1959, called "al-Layālī"<sup>1</sup> (The Nights).

After the central character has exchanged looks with a girl, he feels he should now live up to the standards expected of him. He has found the power within himself to give up drinking, to stop going to the tavern every day with his friends to indulge in drinking sessions and to turn down his friends' invitations when they come to fetch him. All because of the love he harbours for the girl with whom he has exchanged a look, he feels he is a better man. The message is that love, which society believes to be a corrupting influence, can, on the contrary, rehabilitate a bad man.

The same brief look in another story, "Ḥikāyat Ḥubb"<sup>2</sup> (A Tale of Love) by the same author is able to make the main character a happy man irrespective of whether or not his love will lead to the happy conclusion of marriage. The second step he takes after having seen the girl and falling in love with her, is to make friends in the shop opposite her house. This will enable him to see her face whenever she appears from behind the door. He starts spending his evenings

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1. Bashīr al-Hāshimī, "al-Layālī", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qisāsiyya, (Tripoli N.D., (1980?)), p.269.

2. Al-Hāshimī, "Ḥikāyat Ḥubb", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qisāsiyya, p.11. The story was originally written in the early Sixties.



there, preparing the tea for the shop-keeper, reading to him from old books, happy with the place he has secured in front of the shop. But as it happens, his happiness is short-lived. The shop-keeper soon becomes suspicious of the looks he casts at the opposite door, the friendship fades away and the young lover loses his strategic observation post. But love's labour is not lost, for the writer ends the story on a very optimistic note:

"And as I took the long road, a moment of ecstasy came over me. Everything became a beautifully phrased song, and I could only sing it now, sing it in a happy proud tone, looking around me to make sure that I was not disturbing any of the passers-by with my singing."<sup>1</sup>

He was happy as he contemplated the image of the girl with a black lock over her forehead who bewitched his heart. Maḥmūd, in "Nūr al-<sup>c</sup>Ayn"<sup>2</sup> (The Light of the Eye), also by Bashīr al-Hāshimī, is driven mad as the result of a stolen glance he has cast at a neighbouring house. He is now to be seen wandering the streets, singing to himself, and everyone in the area suspects that Maḥmūd is under some sort of a spell. His mother goes immediately to a female fortune teller in order to get help in solving her son's problem. When the fortune teller cannot help, she goes to a faith healer, hoping he will be able to write something that will cast away the evil spirit now in her son. Everyone is worried about him. But Maḥmūd laughs

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1. Ibid., p.16.

2. Al-Hāshimī, "Nūr al-<sup>c</sup>Ayn", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qisāsiyya, p.53.



at all this, for they are ignorant in believing that love is an evil spirit. On the contrary, love is a grace from heaven, and he is happy that he had been fortunate enough to experience it, even though it was only a brief look. The story ends there. But another story by Bashīr al-Hāshimī entitled "al-Hubb fī al-Aziqqa al-Dayyiqā"<sup>1</sup> (Love in the Narrow Alleys) does not end there. He takes his character a step further and allows him to harvest the fruits of his love. Sha<sup>c</sup>bān is the barber of the neighbourhood, and he is in love with Na<sup>c</sup>īma, the girl whom he has seen looking out the balcony opposite his shop. He is worried lest somebody notices the stolen glances he exchanges with her, and ruin his plans to marry her. If someone had noticed, that would give the girl a bad name, and her family would be angry with him and never allow him to come anywhere near her family. The second part of the story tells how the day arrives when he is able to convince his family to agree to his plans to marry her, and how they reluctantly go to the house of the girl's family to ask for her hand. They feel that something is very odd, that he should choose for himself, instead of going by their choice for him. The third part of the story deals with the preparations for the wedding. And, in spite of the heavy dowry that has been asked for, and the very large bill for the wedding expenses, Sha<sup>c</sup>bān is a very happy man.

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1. Al-Hāshimī, "al-Hubb fī al-Aziqqa al-Dayyiqā", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qisāsiyya, p.105.

The story tells of how simple, ordinary people, dwelling in the poor quarter of the city, celebrate life. Despite hardships and difficult traditions, people go through life insisting on their share of its joys. Love in the narrow alleys is one of the joys of life and people like the barber Sha<sup>c</sup>bān can still have their share of it, and get away with it. When he goes wandering through the narrow alleys, he feels that:

"he is not alone, many people are like him, roaming the alleys with more than one story, starting from behind a closed door, or from the iron bars of a window, and others restless, with their hearts crying out for those unfulfilled desires."<sup>1</sup>

But the hopeful tone with which Bashīr al Hāshimī speaks, cannot always convey the intensity and the complications of this issue. The writer facing up to his task, cannot sustain this tone for long, and sooner or later he finds himself up against the hard facts of the situation. "Hikāya <sup>c</sup>an al-Hubb"<sup>2</sup> (A Tale of Love) by Yūsuf al-Sharīf has more social content, for although love here is still that stolen glance, the one who throws the glance is a street cleaner, and the setting is a lower middle class area, and the girl is the prettiest in the neighbourhood, the teller of the story is a witness of this passion that overwhelms Mansūr the street cleaner. The narrator expresses astonishment at how people like Mansūr can take their minds off the gigantic task of making a living long enough to entertain the idea of love.

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1. Ibid., p.117.

2. Yūsuf al-Sharīf, "Hikāya <sup>c</sup>an al-Hubb", al-Jidār (Tripoli 1966), p.11.

"And all of a sudden a strange question came into my mind, is it possible that Mansūr is in love? That could not be true, surely it is impossible, unbelievable. But why not, don't they say love is blind."<sup>1</sup>

Mansūr, however, remains at his post and suppresses his feelings, never uttering a word about his love. The narrator has been able to identify how he feels from the way he looks at her door with tears in his eyes. But he is able to suppress his feeling and hides his wounds stoically and carries on with his job.

In "Mashā<sup>c</sup>ir Harima"<sup>2</sup> (Aging Feeling) Khalīfa al-Tikbālī, tells us how suppressed emotions can stay with us as long as we live, looking for a chance to come out even at the age of seventy. The protagonist in the story is an aged man, who, in a brief encounter with a female tourist in a coffee house, finds that all those feelings he suppressed and tried to hide are still awake inside him. He feels attracted to her emotionally and physically. As she goes away he feels an urge to look for her and to go after her thinking that she is also in love with him, telling the waiter in the cafe that women like her "enjoy old men."<sup>3</sup>

The central character in <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī's "Qādim min Sharq al-Madīna"<sup>4</sup> (Coming from the East of the City) is a more

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1. Ibid., p.16.

2. Khalīfa al-Tikbālī, "Mashā<sup>c</sup>ir Harima", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al Kāmila, (Tripoli 1976), p.15.

3. Ibid., p.21.

4. <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, "Qādim min Sharq al-Madīna", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, (Libya 1975), p.205.



practical man. When he fails in his pursuit of love he travels to the west side of the city, to a brothel, where love is on sale. He finds that this is not the kind of love he is looking for, nor is it the love a writer wants his society to offer its people.

Ahmad in "al-Khafqa al-Bikr"<sup>1</sup> (The Virgin Pulse) by Muḥammad al-Shuwayhidī, hears and reads about love, but has never had a chance to experience it.

'In all the twenty-five barren years of his life, he had never heard a loving word addressed to him, never experienced that youthful intimate trembling. His heart had never beat for love, and he had never felt that another heart was beating for him."<sup>2</sup>

He decides that he must do something about it before it is too late, he must not stay idle and let life pass by like this. He starts by writing a letter to the girl who lives next door. He does not want to expose her to scandal by giving the letter to her by hand, but neither can he mail it to her, lest it falls into the hands of her father. Nevertheless, he finishes writing the letter expressing his sentiments. Unfortunately, the letter fails to reach and falls in the hands of a group of men instead, who start reading it aloud, laughing at his feelings. It is only a little incident in the life of a young man who insists on practising his humanity and fighting

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1. Muḥammad al-Shuwayhidī, "al-Khafqa al-Bikr", Aḥzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid, (Benghazi 1973), p.23.

2. Ibid., p.95.

for his share of a decent existence. If he is injured, that is also to be expected, for as the story tells us he must get up and fight again.

In "Ba<sup>c</sup>d min Taṣawwurinā"<sup>1</sup> (Some of our Assumptions) the same writer tries to show us the other side of the coin, the girl, who, in this case is kept behind closed doors, yet insists on having a share in the joys of life. She harbours a special feeling for her cousin Salīm, whom tradition allows her to come and greet when he visits the house. The story shows us how all her life revolves around his brief visits, and all she waits for is his knock on the door which she recognises. However, she must keep her love for him a secret, because if she were to make known her emotions for him to the older members of the family, "the repercussions might lead to her murder or to her being forced to commit suicide".<sup>2</sup> But as it happens, the man is her cousin and she can rest assured that they will eventually be married. In the meanwhile she can entertain the thought that she will be married to him

"and can love him openly then, and for everyone to see  
and no one will be able to utter a word against her."<sup>3</sup>

In "Lamasāt al-Hawā" (Touches of Love) again by Muḥammad al-Shuwayhidī, we see a more daring couple. The girl this time is

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1. Al-Shuwayhidī, "Ba<sup>c</sup>d min Taṣawwurinā", Aḥzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid, p.7.

2. Ibid., p.10.

3. Ibid., p.10.

unveiled, but the setting of the story is the tomb of a holy man to which she accompanies her mother on visits. These visits provide a good excuse for the man she loves to come and meet her there. The setting is meant to convey the contrast between the old and the new. The mother directing her passion to the myth, after she has lost her right to choose for herself, and the new generation insisting on grabbing the chance to choose and not letting it slip.

But it is not always easy for the emerging new generation, as a story called "Walad wa-bint"<sup>1</sup> (A Boy and a Girl) by Khalīfa Husayn Mustafā tells us. The setting this time is the university campus, and the two lovers, the boy and the girl are students there. They love each other openly, and they speak the language of the modern day:

"'History lectures bore me!'

'Everything in our life is boring, not only history!'

'Love?' she says."<sup>2</sup>

Recognising that love is the only consolation in a tedious boring life, but knowing the dangers of the forbidden fruit the boy says "they pass death sentences on lovers".<sup>3</sup>

Even at university, the home of new thoughts and ideas, cannot, in such a society, afford the luxury of having two young people, a

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1. Khalīfa Husayn Mustafā, "Walad wa-Bint", Tawqī'āt 'alā al-Lahm, (Tripoli 1975), p.43.

2. Ibid., p.45.

3. Ibid., p.45.



boy and a girl, loving each other openly on its premises. They will upset the nature of things as the story tells us. Therefore they are both, of necessity expelled from the university. What worries the narrator of the story most, is not the decision to expel them, but the indifference shown by the other people in the university. No one protests, "no one says anything".<sup>1</sup>

But Khalīfa Husayn Muṣṭafā, representing the new generation of Libyan short story writers, makes his break away from the old formula of direct and narrative writing to tackle this issue in a more poetic, inventive and powerful style seen in his story "Tawqī<sup>c</sup>āt <sup>c</sup>alā al-Lahm"<sup>2</sup> (Signatures on Flesh). The title is an obvious reference to the way tradition dehumanizes the relationships between men and women, and in a tone full of anger and rebellion he describes the whole situation as a nightmare. The central character is merely a representative of the submerged population where everyone is just a clay statue:

"Every morning the clay statue repeats his monotonous games. He slips into a dusty suit and pats his head, then emerges into the street, surprised each time at how constrained he is. That is why we see him contriving arguments with walls and vehicles. He fixes his gaze on balconies, the balconies are reflected in his eyes which explode with terror when he discovers that in every balcony there is the body of a dead

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1. Ibid., p.46.

2. Muṣṭafā, "Tawqī<sup>c</sup>āt <sup>c</sup>alā al-Lahm", Tawqī<sup>c</sup>āt <sup>c</sup>ala al-Lahm, p.51.

girl. And the clay statue which was born of mud, swears that he will never again sink his eyes into dead flesh, or provoke wars with stones, shadows, vehicles and stars devoid of light."<sup>1</sup>

Even his quest for love by merely looking through closed doors and windows and balconies ends in horror; there is nothing but dead flesh. That is how the writer refers to women when denied the right to live an ordinary life, and kept imprisoned behind brick walls.

Life under such conditions will dry up and can only become dead flesh. As for the men in this society, the clay statue, he can only listen obediently to the domineering voice, coming from an unknown source, which is tradition, telling him, as he approaches the queue "Don't put your hands in your pockets."<sup>2</sup> And with a very subtle and polished treatment, the writer starts to describe the victimisation process, revealing the whole cruel nature of this outdated tradition and showing the ugliness of it. The character is:

"A statue made of fragile clay, absorbing air and time, dozing over the headlines of daily papers, merging into the crowds as they scurry and sleep and breed on a large bed."<sup>3</sup>

This insignificant person is asked by the domineering voice to join the queue like everybody else. It is a long queue and he is at the end of it, not knowing what the people are queuing for. But the moment comes when the mystery is revealed:

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1. Ibid., p.53.

2. Ibid., p.53.

3. Ibid., p.52.

"I slunk into a large hall empty of all furniture. A lamp was hanging from the ceiling pouring its light over the body of a naked woman, lying stretched out with legs wide open on the marble floor, without moving.

I approached the woman with trepidation, I had imagined at first that what I was seeing was a day dream, the mysterious woman, the vision of those who die suddenly, embalmed longing. The burning anticipation on the edge of the large bed, spilt blood. There then was the woman unforbidden, and available."<sup>1</sup>

His quest for love is rewarded, his efforts have not gone unnoticed, and his years of deprivation, when he was roaming the streets in search of a female face appearing from behind the curtains of a window have come to a happy end. An entertainment of love and sex is awaiting him now.

"I shakily bent over her and extended a trembling hand. My pulsating blood mingled with my sweat and rapid breathing. Time stood still. My dear mother would never have believed my story. I approached the accursed woman, and my head felt suddenly as if it was plummeting from a mountain. I discovered that the woman was dead, a naked, rigid, dead body."<sup>2</sup>

The men who were in the queue were actually making love to a dead body. The story is not a direct comment on the way marriages are arranged, with no regard to love and emotions. But the reader

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1. Ibid., pp.54-55.

2. Ibid., p.55.



studying the story cannot help but make some comparison between the way a man is driven to the bridal chamber in the case of arranged marriages where the man usually has not even seen or met the woman, for him she can only be a heap of flesh, an outlet for his biological urge. And the woman is usually brought to the man's house without knowing him, sometimes without anybody asking her opinion or caring about her feelings. A very dehumanizing affair. The reference to marriage becomes clearer when he mocks the way society expects the man to conquer the woman's virginity:

"the breasts were clustered in the chest, flaccid, and shrunken without a sparkle or a glimmer. The legs spread-eagled in anticipation, spread open to silence, death, and disappointment, waiting for an invasion that would not occur. A rain shower soon dried by the air. The legs spread open waiting for blood to course through their veins."<sup>1</sup>

The people before him seem to have enjoyed the entertainment they left behind their signatures, and finger-prints.

"I noticed small circles and twisted interwoven lines and some drops of shiny saliva on the body. The corpse was covered with red blotches as if they had been caused by savage livid pinch-marks, some had not been content with merely pinching but had sunk their teeth into the dead flesh. I fled from the hall."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.55.

2. Ibid., p.56.

The hall was the scene of a party of savages, the cruel nature of the social code that separates men and women is exposed and condemned in strong terms. The bitter results society reaps are unavoidable. Every member in it suffers. The distortion that is inflicted on people's minds is but a result of these traditions and are but the unavoidable consequences of that savage process.

The sense of protest against these practices has intensified as the stories under study show us. They also make their point clear that the liberation of society, which it can only achieve for itself, is the only way to a healthy atmosphere and can be created where every member is allowed to lead an unexploited and happier life.

## Chapter Eleven

### FAMILY SITUATIONS



Because the family has always been the basic and the most important pillar in a traditional society, many Libyan short story writers try to tackle the issues that are related to it. This is particularly true in the case of an author campaigning against old attitudes towards arranged marriages and other aspects of domination imposed by the family on the lives of its children.

"<sup>c</sup>Indamā Yufqad al-Amal"<sup>1</sup> (When Hope is Lost) by <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Qādir Abū Harrūs is one of the stories published in the mid-Fifties. It describes the tension and disappointment of two people, a man and a woman, on their wedding night. The story begins with the procession that takes the bridegroom to the bed-chamber where the bride is waiting for him, and the panic that all of a sudden comes over him when he remembers that he is now going to meet a complete stranger who is destined to be his wife. He can do nothing but hope that she will come up to his expectations. He is thinking that he should not have agreed to marry a woman whom he has never seen, while his friends are giving him advice on how to handle the situation as if he were going into battle. They tell him how he should enter the room and how to

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1. <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Qādir Abū Harrūs, "<sup>c</sup>Indamā Yufqad al-Amal", Nufūs Hā'ira, (Tripoli 1957), p.97.

treat the bride. He must immediately take the sugar from the bridesmaid and give her some money and ask her to go. Then he must try to perform a prayer inside the room. They all offer him advice on how a man should behave on a big night like this, for his actions tonight, they tell him, will set the pattern for the rest of his married life. The story goes on to tell us what is happening in the bridal chamber. It describes how the women are more inclined to fill the head of the little bride with silly ideas and vicious stories of how to meet her husband. This supposedly, is to give her heart, but instead, she is filled with horror.

"Be ready, bite him, scratch him, and fight him off. Don't allow him to come near you. Every one of them, on a night like this, becomes a beast. You will see how red his eyes will be, how he will be panting like a camel, butting like a ram."<sup>1</sup>

She is frightened, but another lady comes to comfort her. She takes the bride into her arms

"Why are you frightened Su<sup>C</sup>ād, depend on your strength and don't panic. What is he? He is made of flesh and blood like others. So beat him up, scratch and bite him, and take out one of his eyes and don't be afraid. Listen Su<sup>C</sup>ād God has created men like dogs. Confront them, show them how strong you are, and don't be frightened of them, so that they will be frightened and run away."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.107.

2. Ibid., p.108.

Endless talk like this goes into the ears of the bride. The story is written in a humorous style, but the writer is really more concerned with practices and rituals of wedding parties than with the premises on which marriage in such societies were originally founded and the primitive manner in which people are tied in so-called "sacred bondage".

The story does not omit to tell us that Su<sup>C</sup>ād is in fact a very sensitive girl. She has always dreamed that her husband will come like a magical figure on a mid-summer night, and gently and lovingly take her into his arms. But tonight she finds out about the harsh realities of married life. As she arrives at the foot of the stairs leading to her chamber, they slaughter a lamb under her feet and the sight of the blood fills her heart with fear. She stands in the room waiting; and "her make-up couldn't hide the yellow colouring of death on her face".<sup>1</sup>

The inevitable moment arrives, when they both have to meet. She feels inclined to act according to the instructions she received from the experienced women. She pulls together what strength she can, and starts to fight the man. He looks surprised, takes his cap and walks out leaving her with a powerful sense of loss and regret.

Khalīfa al-Tikbālī in "al-Iṣba<sup>C</sup> al-Majrūh"<sup>2</sup> (The Wounded Finger) deals with another aspect of the wedding night. He attacks in his

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1. Ibid., p.112.

2. Khalīfa al-Tikbālī, "al-Iṣba<sup>C</sup> al-Majrūh", al-A<sup>C</sup>māl al-Kāmila (Libya 1976), p.101.



story an old custom which still lives on in Libyan villages, where the blood-stained sheet, proving the bride's virginity, is displayed on the first night of the marriage. The custom is considered a declaration of the girl's chastity and purity. Again, in this story too, the bride and the groom have never known each other before and, in fact he had never wanted to marry her, or any other girl for that matter, at least not just now. But his mother insisted that she wanted to see him a married man before she died. To avoid upsetting her, he agrees and she just went out and chose a girl for him, and it is only now that he sees her face for the first time. He feels no immediate desire to go to bed with her, but the crowds outside are shouting and urging him to prove his manhood as well as the purity of his bride. He comes out and tells them to leave it until tomorrow night because he is tired and wants to get to know the girl. But they push him inside, asking him to get on with it now. To satisfy them, he cuts his finger and wipes the blood on one of the bride's garments, and takes it out, pretending it is the blood of her virginity. They all applaud and give cries of joy and happiness.

The story exposes the hypocrisy inherent in these out-dated traditions and rituals. It calls for change and reform, as indeed do most of the stories that deal with such aspects of family life.

The subject of the wedding night gives the writer the chance to bring into view the sufferings that exist behind the glittering facade of the wedding celebrations. The irony of the situation and the contrast that is there makes it a favourite topic and a recurring scene

in many Libyan short stories. It is always a very unpleasant experience, even if the relationship turns out to be successful. Yet this first meeting which is supposed to be a happy occasion, is always depicted as a nightmare. In a short story by Kāmil al-Maqhūr entitled "al-Mīlād"<sup>1</sup> (The Birth) the central character tells of his feelings on coming to the bedroom where the bride is waiting for him:

"When I stood in front of her I felt unable to do anything..... I was unable to speak. My hands were unable to move. I was pinned there, with a colourless, meaningless smile on my face."<sup>2</sup>

"I tried to remember the advice of my friends..... or draw on my past experience with other women..... But I stood still, moving my eyes in idiocy."<sup>3</sup>

"Sweat was just flooding out of my body, and Zaynūba looked at the wall aimlessly, like a frightened cat, and the sweat was pouring over her forehead and running through her make-up."<sup>4</sup>

Such accounts leave the reader with the impression that he would never want to go through an experience like this. But people continue to have their marriages arranged according to the old customs and the writers continue to oppose and protest.

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1. Kāmil al-Maqhūr, "al-Mīlād", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, (Tripoli 1965), p.83.

2. Ibid., p.87.

3. Ibid., p.88.

4. Ibid., p.88.

In a story written at a later date (1965) by Bashīr al-Hāshimī, "Lu<sup>c</sup>bat al-Sayd wa-al-Ghazāl"<sup>1</sup> (The Game of the Lion and the Gazelle), we see that the situation is still much the same. The newly married couple are brought together with no previous experience or knowledge of each other. The only small improvement is when we see the man in the story resisting the advice given by his friends to treat his bride harshly:

"Listen carefully, do not forget to act like a man....."

'Give some money to the bridesmaid, but do not smile, and do not speak.....'

'Let your eyes be like arrows of fire.....'

'You have to be like a lion. Attack and strike..... till the gazelle acknowledges defeat.'"<sup>2</sup>

When the procession to take him to his bride's chamber started, he felt very uneasy and decided he would refuse to enter the chamber, but the voices were still with him, ringing into his ears "Attack like a lion".<sup>3</sup>

When they arrived in front of the house, his final decision was not to go in, but the crowds around him took him inside forcibly. But no sooner is he in the room, than the idea dawns on him that he should cast away all that they had told him; he would forget all that he had just heard.

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1. Bashīr al-Hāshimī, "Lu<sup>c</sup>bat al-Sayd wa-al-Ghazāl", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qasāsiyya, (Tripoli n.d. (1980?)), p.119.

2. Ibid., p.123.

3. Ibid., p.123.



"He forgets the words of Sha<sup>c</sup>bān and those of Mansūr.  
He will forget the game of the lion and the gazelle,  
all he knows now is that he is entering a place where  
there is another human being, and together they are  
going to start a new life."<sup>1</sup>

All the writers of these stories set themselves to tell the reader how very unpleasant an experience the wedding night can be, in contrast to the general belief that it is the happiest occasion in a person's life. And in spite of some characters' reluctance to conform with some of the rituals, in fact we see almost total submission by the participants to the blind dictates of an outdated social order. Only a few years later, we can detect a sense of protest and challenge in the characters the writers describe. In "al-Lu<sup>c</sup>ba"<sup>2</sup> (The Game) by Khalīfa Ḥusayn Mustafā, written in 1975 we see a different wedding night. The woman in this case is taken against her will to the man who has enough money to satisfy the greed of her father. On her wedding day she has felt disgust at all the rituals and jubilations, because the whole party is a lie, and is not a wedding, but a bargain. She did not accept it, she refused and resisted it, but her parents forced her to marry him. And here she is waiting in her chamber for him to come, reflecting on the events leading to her wedding.

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1. Ibid., p.124.

2. Khalīfa Ḥusayn Mustafā, "al-Lu<sup>c</sup>ba", Tawqī<sup>c</sup>āt <sup>c</sup>alā al-Lahm, (Tripoli 1975), p.59.

"When he has become tired, after chasing her for a long time with no results, he swears that he will possess that desirable body with his familiar commercial style, like the way he cheats, the way he lies, the way he exploits. What is the difference?

It will be a bargain anyway.

'What a body, God damn it. It is worth a whole city.

A lustful body.

I will conquer it according to the ancient Arabian way.'"<sup>1</sup>

In the last part of the story we are taken back to the bride's chamber. The groom is already there, approaching the victim, celebrating his victory, happy that he has won the battle with his money and possessed this desirable female body. He starts making love to the woman lying in bed. The woman is cold and motionless. It is just because she is still upset, he thinks. He tries to get some reaction, but to his horror he finds out that he is making love to a dead woman. She has taken her life as a protest against the cruel social custom that allowed her to be sold like an animal, to be married by force to a man she does not love, and also to prevent him celebrating what he thought was his victory over her.

The dead body in the story represents the dead body of every other bride taken forcibly to her bridal chamber. Even if she has not taken her own life, still she is a dead body, because the whole affair is built on rules which pay no consideration to human happiness and aspirations. The story also demonstrates one of the reasons why

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1. Ibid., p.62.

such practices were not abolished and finished with a long time ago. Abolishing them would have been against the interests of powerful elements in society such as the wealthy and the corrupt businessman who would resist any change that would prevent him from buying anything he wanted, even humans. Such greed is helped of course by the greed of the father who is ready to sell his daughter.

As for how life develops after the wedding night Kāmil al-Maqhūr, in one of his early stories, "al-Yamīn"<sup>1</sup> (The Oath), gives us some insights. In this case the man lives with his mother, who was behind the idea of his marriage from the beginning. She decided when he should get married, and in order not to upset her he agreed. Then she chose for him the girl who was to become his wife. But later on when he starts to become fond of his wife, his mother feels jealous, and fearful of losing her grip over her son, she decides to work towards divorcing him from his wife. Again her son resists the idea of divorcing his wife because he is happy with her. But the mother insists that he should sacrifice his happiness and his married life, and his newly born child, and goes to the Shaykh of the neighbourhood to register the divorce. Here is an example of how possessiveness on the part of a parent, done in the name of caring, can ruin the happiness of the child.

This mother was jealous of her child's happiness in his bride. But in many cases this jealousy would not have existed, for the life of

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1. Al-Maqhūr, "al-Yamīn", 14 Qissa min Madīnatī, p.97.



the newly wedded couple, as the Libyan short story writer tells us, is not always a happy affair.

"Māta Gharīban"<sup>1</sup> (A Stranger he Died) by <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī is a story told by a son who witnessed in agony the existing relationship between his mother and his father:

"When we used to hear him coming towards the house, bidding his friends 'Good night', we would know immediately that our night would be an evil one."<sup>2</sup>

From the moment he arrived, and that was usually late at night, he would find some reason to wake his wife and son, and another reason to swear at them and beat them. The son remembers how he grew up in the atmosphere of hatred, violence, and vindictiveness which existed in the house. He also remembers how he once interfered to save his mother, when a quarrel between his parents reached the point when his father took a knife and decided to kill his mother. He found enough courage to stand up against him and take the knife away and hit his father in the face. The father left the family and went away. When the news of his death reached them, his mother started weeping, feeling sorry for him because as she put it, "He died a stranger".<sup>3</sup> The writer maintains that he not only died a stranger, he lived as a stranger, due to so many faults and shortcomings in the

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1. <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, "Māta Gharīban", Sittūn Qissa Qasīra, (Libya 1975), p.344.

2. Ibid., p.347.

3. Ibid., p.349.

society around him, as well as the appalling conditions a poor family has to live under.

The author, in another story, called "al-Khātim"<sup>1</sup> (The Ring) tells us that even on becoming wealthy, these horrendous conditions can still influence people's lives. Blinded by greed and the fear of becoming poor again a father neglects his family life and abuses his wife and son, until the day comes when they both, the mother and the son who has now grown up, walk out on him, leaving him to his money and greed.

In the case of marital violence, the wife, as is described in some short stories, is conditioned to accept this abusive treatment which is considered normal in the relationship between a husband and a wife. It is considered to be the right of the husband to beat his wife even when the wife has done nothing to deserve such punishment. Indeed, it can be just a way for the husband to express his anger and indignation towards something outside the house. Needless to say, it is only a common practice in rural areas and the poorer quarters of the city where ignorance and lack of education prevail.

In "al-Qiṭṭa"<sup>2</sup> (The Cat) by Yūsuf al-Sharīf, we see how a husband after a night of drunkenness and quarrelling wakes in the morning to find that his dear wife is not in her usual place beside him. He remembers how the night before he used a big stick to beat her, and how she ran

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1. Al-Quwayrī, "al-Khātim", Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.260.

2. Yūsuf al-Sharīf, "al-Qiṭṭa", al-Jidār, (Tripoli 1966), p.101.

for her life, and went to stay at her father's house leaving their small boy with him. He feels very upset, and as an expression of his anger he slaps the little boy on the face when he has just woken up. He reaches for the black cat, which he considers a bad omen, trying to release his anger on it, but the cat scratches him and runs away. He remembers that his wife Fattūma is not as aggressive as the cat:

"For four years, she bore all the pain he inflicted on her in silence and submission."<sup>1</sup>

He now feels that he wants her and wishes he could see her back in the house. As he is thinking about what he should do next, a boy comes to the house, carrying a tray sent by his wife containing his breakfast, which she has prepared for him as a token of her affection and her intention to come back to him. The story is meant to show us the intimacy that exists between these two people. But it can also be interpreted as an example of the brutality to which the wife is subjected and the near masochism with which she will accept the pain inflicted on her by a sadistic husband who would wake his three year old child to beat him, run after the cat to strangle it, and use a rolling pin to beat his wife about the head every night.

There are situations, where the relationship between the wife and the husband are not always so strained.

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1. Ibid., p.105.



Mabrūka, in "Mabrūka, Umm al-Ṣighār"<sup>1</sup> (Mabrūka the Mother of the Children) by Bashīr al-Hāshimī leads a relatively happy life. She finds after her marriage that she has moved to a relatively respectable house. Her husband is a "faqīh" teaching in a Quranic school, she is happy that she is now the mother of three boys, and she is hoping to have a girl who would help her with the domestic work. She is too engrossed in the trivialities of everyday life to care about the wrongs and rights of her conditions. She worries because her husband has not brought a present to her mother on some occasion which makes the relationship between the two pass through an uneasy period. She looks forward to going to a wedding she is invited to, but she is still not sure whether her husband will agree to buy her new clothes and so on and so forth.

In "Sallim Rājilhā"<sup>2</sup> (Save her Man) by <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī we see how a wife accepts her degradation, happy with her role in the marriage partnership, because she has been conditioned to do so, to be content with her humiliating place at the feet of her husband.

"Obedience to her man was in her blood; had she ever loved him? The truth was that she had never known what the word love meant, all she knew was that he was her master. She looked up to him waiting for a word of approval or a smile of tenderness, or even just a glance from him."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Al-Hāshimī, "Mabrūka, Umm al-Ṣighār", 3 Majmū'āt Qaṣaṣiyya, (Tripoli (1980?)), p.207.

2. Al-Quwayrī, "Sallim Rājilhā" Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qaṣīra, p.156.

3. Ibid., p.159.

The slave-master relationship, and the hate-love atmosphere, prevails in most short stories dealing with the subject.

The writer also directs his criticism towards the way marriages are arranged. In "al-Bint Kaburat"<sup>1</sup> (The Girl has Grown up) by Yūsuf al-Sharīf we see how the father and the mother discuss the future of their daughter who has now arrived at the age of marriage. "Your daughter, Fawziyya"<sup>2</sup> is how the mother starts to address her husband, who senses some urgency in what the wife says, and turns towards her with an angry face asking her to tell him quickly what it is.

"The son of Hājj Mukhtār wants to propose to her."<sup>3</sup>  
The father rejects the idea, because there has been a better offer.

"I have already given my word to the son of Mahmūd."<sup>4</sup>  
When he sees how surprised his wife is, he says:

"Mahmūd is a rich man, the owner of a car agency, and he is ready to pay."<sup>5</sup>

But the wife wants the other man for her daughter:

"The son of the Hājj is better for her. His father is an official, with a high rank, who owns five villas, and a supermarket."<sup>6</sup>

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1. Yūsuf al-Sharīf, "al-Bint Kaburat", al-Jidār, p.61.

2. Ibid., p.63.

3. Ibid., p.64.

4. Ibid., p.64.

5. Ibid., p.64.

6. Ibid., p.65.

The husband insists that he will have the final word on this matter, when his wife shows some resistance:

"he just could not bear it any more. His answer was a harsh slap on the face which she couldn't avoid."<sup>1</sup>

The parents see the potential of a good bargain, but the daughter who is being bidden for is kept in the dark, until the one who offers the highest price comes along and takes her away. As for the son, although he is consulted, the problem of the dowry always stands in the way, as a story by Muḥammad al-Shuwayhidī, entitled "al-Ikhtiyār"<sup>2</sup> (The Choice), tells us.

The boy also has arrived at the age of marriage, and his parents decide that he should now get married. His mother comes with a message from his father telling him of the decision and asking him his opinion. She wants to know whether he has any preference regarding the girl he will soon marry. He humbly answers:

"Whoever God chooses and you approve of would be fine with me."<sup>3</sup>

The mother wants his help in the decision, she hears him whispering some name and she feels upset:

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1. Ibid., p.65.

2. Muḥammad al-Shuwayhidī, "al-Ikhtiyār", Aḥḥād al-Yawm al-Wāhid, (Benghazi 1973), p.87.

3. Ibid., p.88.



"You know very well that she is from a rich family. You also know that she has finished her secondary school, which means, my son, that her dowry would not be less than one thousand Dinars. Add to that the other incidentals, the sum would rise to two thousand Dinars. That is if her family consents."<sup>1</sup>

The favourite choice of his mother is the daughter of his uncle Maḥmūd Simḥa, "who had not been seen in the streets for ten years, ever since she was seven."<sup>2</sup>

The dowry will not exceed one hundred dinars. Another girl could also be his destiny, as his mother puts it, the daughter of Ḥājj <sup>c</sup>Alī, as her dowry will also be affordable, one hundred and fifty dinars. As for Zuhra, although she is not a well behaved girl, her family wants the dowry of a college girl. With regard to Zaynab the dowry would be so and so. The son feels disgusted and wants to put off the whole idea of marriage until the system is abolished.

But as another story tells us, the system is there to stay for a long time, it is described as a market place. That is where the Ḥājj in "Baqāyā Rajul"<sup>3</sup> (The Remains of a Man) by Khalīfa Ḥusayn Muṣṭafā, has the advantage over other suitors. Old as he is, he is still able to marry a young and beautiful woman, sought after by

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1. Ibid., p.88.

2. Ibid., p.89.

3. Muṣṭafā, "Baqāyā Rajul", Tawqī<sup>c</sup>at <sup>c</sup>alā al-Lahm, p.7.

every young man in the area. With his money he is able to buy his way through and win the consent of the girl's father.

"In the beginning her father strongly rejected your request. He even blew the smoke of his cigarette in your face. And you said, 'I am ready to pay whatever dowry you ask for, from one hundred to one thousand'. He nearly died of joy. He agreed while asking God's forgiveness."<sup>1</sup>

Although it is greed that makes the father favour an old man who can afford to pay, and reject the proposals of more suitable men, it is said to be done in the name of the girl's interest. The money is supposed to be the guarantee of a secure future for the daughter and of her children and this is helped of course by the lack of awareness on the part of the girl. They often get away with it, but in this particular case the whole thing ends in disgrace when the Hājī finds out on his wedding night that he is no longer capable at his advanced age of performing his duties as a husband. He has become impotent. The story makes it clear that the impotence of the Hājī is symbolic as well as real. It is a symbol of the whole impotence of the system which was inherited from an earlier period and it is time for society to modify its practices and to adopt a system more appropriate to this day and age.

As for other family situations such as the second wife, or the barren wife, we find that, in most short stories that deal with such subjects the reason for having a second wife is usually because the

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1. Ibid., p.10.

first wife is unable to bear children. Indeed the wife herself sometimes takes it upon herself to persuade her husband to marry another wife, so that he will not be deprived of having children. In "al-Hājj Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd"<sup>1</sup> by Muḥammad al-Shuwayhidī we see how the wife of the Hājj is anxious and worried because in the twenty years they have been together, she has been unable to bear him a child. She starts hinting that he should marry again:

"And she suddenly burst into tears, releasing the grief she felt because of her lack of a devout son who would look after both of them."<sup>2</sup>

And she tells her husband to feel free:

"You don't know how sad I feel when I remember that I have deprived you of the son who would look after you in your old age. We must find a solution. You have not passed forty years of age and....."<sup>3</sup>

She is not able to continue because although she wants him to marry again, she finds it a difficult thing to say.

In the case of Shaykh Bil<sup>c</sup>īd in a story called "al-Shay' al-Khafī "<sup>4</sup> (The Hidden Thing) by Yūsuf al-Sharīf, it is not just because his wife Fāṭima is barren that he wants to remarry. It is also because he fancies Zaynūba to whom he has already sent somebody

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1. Al-Shuwayhidī, "al-Hājj Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd", Aḥzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid, p.45.

2. Ibid., p.47.

3. Ibid., p.48.

4. Al-Sharīf, "al-Shay' al-Khafī", al-Jidār, p.53.



to ask her opinion. And now he is faced with the impossible task of telling his wife that, as they have been married for seven years with no children it is right for him to marry another woman who might be able to bear him children. He also wants to tell her that the woman with whom she would share the house is Zaynuba, whose reputation is not all good among the women of the area. But the reaction of Fātima is not what Shaykh Bil<sup>c</sup>īd expects for she asks him for a divorce if he intends to marry another woman.

In "Ahzān <sup>c</sup>Ammi al-Dawkālī"<sup>1</sup> (The Sorrows of Uncle Dawkālī) in a story by Bashīr al-Hāshimī, Uncle Dawkālī takes no chances, he left his first wife in the dark until he was already married to another woman. That was perhaps because his first wife was a very forceful woman who would never have allowed this to happen if she had known. So it was while she was absent from the house that he went and fulfilled his wish.

In fact the stories that deal with situations like this are very few indeed, as it is no longer such a common practice as it used to be. Another family situation, which is more common than that of the second wife, is the foreign wife. But equally here, the number of stories that tackle this issue is very few. Perhaps the foreign wife tends to cast herself in the role of the native woman in order to adapt herself to the new situation and becomes part of the society.

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1. Bashīr al-Hāshimī, "Ahzān <sup>c</sup>Ammi al-Dawkālī", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qasasiyya, p.187.

There are of course some odd cases where the foreign woman cannot adapt herself to the new situation, and stays alien to the whole set up, which is when the clash starts. That is where the writer comes in.

In such cases the writer views the marriage of a native man to a foreign woman with suspicion and distrust. This is not always merely because the woman is foreign; it is due to the fact that the man has been driven in haste to marry a woman from an environment he does not know, and in his haste to grab the chance he is frequently fooled and cheated. This is what happens to <sup>C</sup>Alī in the story "Bidā<sup>C</sup>a Mustawrada"<sup>1</sup> (Imported Goods) by <sup>C</sup>Abd al-Qādir Abū Harrūs. <sup>C</sup>Alī refuses to marry according to the Libyan tradition where there is no chance to get acquainted with his wife before marriage. When he is picked to go to Beirut for a six-month training course,

"He left the country delighted about being sent, and pleased that he would be afforded the opportunity of choosing his life companion himself in accordance with his own taste and inclination, after tasting with her the food of love."<sup>2</sup>

"There, there was a land which respected the individual and where the individual's ambitions could be realized, and where he was free to determine his own course in life."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Abū Harrūs, "Bidā<sup>C</sup>a Mustawrada", Nufūs Hā'ira, p.143. The above quotations are taken from the translation by R.Y. Ebeid and M.J.L. Young, Arab Stories, East and West, (Leeds 1977).
  2. Ebeid and Young, Arab Stories, p.68.
  3. Ibid., p.68.

His ambition is to marry the girl:

"who understands me. And who loves in me the soul, the man and the husband. And in whom, I love the soul, the woman, and the wife. This is something that we don't find here, because our girls are still below such a level of awareness and maturity. This kind of girl is only to be found abroad, outside our country, where women are accustomed to freedom and are aware of their position in life. There the woman is a partner in life. Here she is a wretched, miserable, servant in the house. I shall not marry a local girl, even if it means I remain a bachelor for the rest of my life."<sup>1</sup>

So when he married the girl who used to sit next to him in his school, it was not as he thought because of the dictates of love. It was in fact because of the dictates of his own society which drove him to think along these lines and to grasp whatever chance he could, lest he miss out on married life altogether. Thus when it turns out to be a bad choice and the woman cheats him and keeps up her relationship with an old lover after marrying him, it seems natural. It is society that has driven him into a situation when he is fooled and cheated.

Another interesting example is the main character in a story by Khalīfa al-Tikbālī called "Ḥikāyat Ṣadīqī"<sup>2</sup> (The Story of my Friend). This man, while on a holiday abroad, falls in love with the first woman he meets, who happens to be a prostitute. He goes out of his way to propose to her, and fights his friends who try to get him to

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1. Ibid., p.70.

2. Al-Tikbālī, "Ḥikāyat Ṣadīqī", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.184.



reconsider his decision, because the woman is not suitable for him. He insists on marrying her. The narrator does not fail to see the motivation behind his friend's behaviour, which was the result of a life-time of frustration and deprivation and a set of social taboos and prohibition, directed against the natural inclination of a healthy male towards the opposite sex. As he was denied the chance to satisfy his inclination in a society that separates men and women, it is quite understandable that a young man might commit the mistake of marrying the wrong girl when he travels abroad. That is why the foreign wife in another story by the same author called "al-Manzil al-Jadīd"<sup>1</sup> (The New House) does not come up to the expectations of her husband's family. In return she shows them no respect, and also is a bad influence on her husband when she makes him agree to take the new house he is building for his mother which was the life dream of the elderly lady. The writer tells us in a very sentimental style how she takes away the house and takes away the husband, and leaves the old woman in tears.

If this is the way a family is constructed, then it would be appropriate at this stage to look into the effect it all has on the way children are brought up, as the short story writer sees it. For children, after all, are the primary reason for the creation of the institution, and therefore its main purpose.

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1. Al-Tikbālī, "al-Manzil al-Jadīd", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.177.

Although it may appear rather inconsistent with the examples given above, children in this society are, nevertheless, extremely loved and cared for. There is an obvious reason for this, which is that as there were no social institutions, in what was mainly a rural and bedouin society, that looked after the elderly, the retired and the ill, it was left to the members of the family to care for their people who were unfit to work. And that is why we see the wife in "al-Hājj Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd", the story we mentioned earlier, lamenting her lack of a child who would look after her and her husband in their old age. The devotion they put into their children, as the writer tells us, is an investment for the future security of their parents and for their protection in their old age. Another point which is worth mentioning is that despite the deprivation and social oppression the parents go through, in their lives and their dealings with society, their children provide some sort of compensation. They give their parents a sense of purpose in life, as well as a chance to make up for lost opportunities in love and a happy partnership in marriage, although this is more often the case with the mother.

But it is equally important to point out that this situation is not altogether to the advantage of the children. These excessive doses of devotion can become a possessive and domineering element which can stunt any potential in the children to develop their own personalities as a result of which they remain for their entire lives dependent on their parents, or one of their parents to make decisions for them like the son in "al-Yamīn", by Kāmil al-Maqhūr which we mentioned previously.



In addition to this there is the harmful attitude which people still have where corporal punishment is still considered an acceptable form of teaching children discipline and good behaviour. This is why even today in schools and places of learning corporal punishment is still a part of the educational system.

But the child can not be expected to understand the lofty principles behind the cruelty inflicted on him, neither is it the job of the creative writer to justify such cruelty in the light of these principles. The child can only experience the pain and suffering that are caused by the punishment and the writer can only try when writing about it to express the feeling of the child, and declare his sympathy with him. He cannot remain detached, even if this detachment is sometimes needed for the refinement of his art. His social message in a situation like this comes even before his craft.

In "Aḥzān Ṣaghīra"<sup>1</sup> (Little Sorrows) <sup>C</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī gives an account of the ordeals a little boy goes through because of this cruel method of teaching him discipline. He receives punishment daily at the hands of his father whom the child knows to love him. The author all the while expresses his utter revulsion at the way the child is treated, and condemns the father who beats his child to keep him loyal to him. He shows his reader how it is a very wrong attitude, simply because one cannot make people better by degrading them. He

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1. Al-Quwayrī, "Aḥzān Ṣaghīra", Sittūn Qissa Qasīra, p.165.



demonstrates this in some other stories which end up with the son revolting against the father instead of being loyal to him. This occurs in his story "al-Khātīm" which we have mentioned, when the son takes his mother and leaves the house of his father. And he writes of it again with the son who had turned against his father and hit him in "Māta Gharīban". As for making a better man, the short story writer also challenges this idea by showing how most of the shortcomings in the behaviour of the father himself are due to the way he was treated when he was a child. Society must break away from this vicious circle of children suffering at the hands of their fathers because they often grow up to inflict it on their own children, and so it continues.

In "al-Was<sup>c</sup>āya"<sup>1</sup> (The Courtyard) Bashīr al-Hāshimī tells of the agony of a little boy whose father believes in physical punishment and has a strap for this purpose. Even the child's natural inclination to play is somehow distorted. He is obsessed with the fear that while playing he may do something which his father would not permit. He is frightened to go back home because he knows that there is a leather belt which his father uses to beat him with, waiting for him the moment he arrives.

This is not because the father does not love him, but only because he is frightened something might happen to him and he wants him always

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1. Al-Hāshimī, "al-Was<sup>c</sup>āya", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qaṣaṣiyya, p.169.

under his watch. But the father in "Saqī<sup>c</sup> Taht al-Jild"<sup>1</sup> (A Chill Beneath the Skin), by <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Qawayrī, faces a dilemma. He wants to protect his son and not to expose him to the hostility of other children lest something unpleasant happens to him. At the same time he does not want his son to behave in a cowardly fashion. He wants him to learn how to be a man who can stand up for his rights.

"He stood there looking at his son as if he were seeing him for the first time. In his mind was the thought: would his son be able to beat the other boy, or would the other boy defeat him again? Well, he must know his rights, and must learn to fight for them."<sup>2</sup>

Although he allows his son to go and fight the boy who assaulted him, he is now very worried at what might happen to him, feeling a chill beneath the skin.

The child always faces these situations with mixed emotions as in "A<sup>c</sup>ṭinī Qirsh"<sup>3</sup> (Give me a Piastre) by the same author. The boy fails to understand the complexities and vicissitudes of his father's behaviour, when he shows some moments of affection and at other times treats him badly. The boy cannot decide whether he hates his father or loves him. He even decides, in a moment of anger, to stay away and never go back to the house in order to make his father suffer. This happens when he asked his father to give him a piastre, but is refused.

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1. Al-Quwayrī, "Saqī<sup>c</sup> Taht al-Jild, Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qiṣīra, p.181.

2. Ibid., p.185.

3. Al-Quwayrī, "A<sup>c</sup>ṭinī Qirsh" Sittūn Qiṣṣa Qasīra, p.177.



The boy becomes angry, but his ideas of rebellion subside when his father calls him back and tells him to go to his mother and take a piastre from her.

In order to demonstrate how vital the role of the family is in the life of the children, in a society like Libya's, Khalīfa al-Tikbālī chooses a very melodramatic situation to show his reader the effect the break-up of a family may have on the children, Using all the ingredients of poverty, ignorance, and drunkenness to dramatise their misfortune. In his story, "al-Budhūr al-Dā'i<sup>c</sup>a"<sup>1</sup> (The Wasted Seeds) we can see the father awaiting the 12 year-old boy, who is now wandering in the streets, frightened to return to a house where only his cruel father lives. His mother has now left the house having been divorced, and his violent drunken father is waiting there to beat him, there being nobody in the house to protect him from his anger as formerly when his mother was there. The writer shows us how his fate cannot be different from that of his elder brother who some time previously had left the house to join a gang of robbers and later was killed in a quarrel over the loot by another member of the gang. In "Hikāyat Kidhba"<sup>2</sup> (The Story of a Lie) by the same author, the boy is caught up in a situation where he feels neglected and forgotten. His mother has been divorced and his father is married to another woman and he does not know where to turn for attention. In his father's

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1. Al-Tikbālī, "al-Budhūr al-Dā'i<sup>c</sup>a" al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.71.

2. Al-Tikbālī, "Hikāyat Kidhba", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, p.93.



house his step-mother tells him how evil his mother is, and that she is involved in witchcraft, all of which she knows because she was presently using her evil magical powers to induce her to fall ill. His mother, for her part, tells him that the other woman is the real witch and that is why she charmed his father and took him away. The boy, influenced by this atmosphere of superstition, and yearning for some attention and recognition, pretends that he has found a treasure which will alter their life and make them rich. He lives, in his fantasy because it is difficult for him to face up to the harsh realities of his life.

As for the happy child who has a good life, with a caring and loving father who does not beat him, but plays with him and buys him sweets and toys we can only see glimpses of this child when it becomes part of the build-up to a climax, when the reader is to be prepared for a terrible shock. This happens in a story called "al-Shay' al-Aṣfar"<sup>1</sup> (The Yellow Thing) by <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, himself the writer of the largest number of short stories dealing with tortured and persecuted childhood. In this story he changes his colours, and presents the child as a happy little boy, with all the love and devotion a boy can dream of, with an exceptionally nice father who spends most of his time playing with him. All this is used as preparation for the moment when the father is shown coming home from

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1. Al-Quwayrī, "al-Shay' al-Aṣfar", al-Zayt wa-al-Tamr, 3rd edition, (Tripoli 1980), p.150.

the scene of a crime when he has just committed a robbery and is expected to be caught and taken to prison.

Another story in which the boy is happy and properly treated by his father, is called "Shahanāt al-Karāhiya"<sup>1</sup> (Loads of Hatred) by Muhammad al-Shuwayhidī. It is told in the first person by a ten year old boy:

"I couldn't think of being away from him for one moment.

He would take me to spend the after-noon with him,

watching a football match, or a film, or going to the

"Dark Market",<sup>2</sup> or to one of the recreation centres, or

the big stores where I would be able to choose whatever

clothes or toys I wanted to buy, without any objection.

I would only sleep when I put my head on his knees."<sup>3</sup>

All of this is a part of the build-up to the shock the writer is preparing his reader for, when he will soon learn how this wonderful father was involved in a car accident. He dies and leaves his family to suffer. The loads of hatred in the title of the story refers to the feelings of the boy towards his mother, when, after six months of widowhood, she accepts an offer to marry again. He hates his mother for it, and rejects the idea of anybody taking the place of his father.

The writer as a campaigner for social reform concentrates, as some of these stories show us, on the negative aspects of family

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1. Al-Shuwayhidī, "Shahnat al-Karāhiya", Ahzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid, p.117.

2. A Market Place in Benghazi.

3. Ibid., p.118.

life, and declares war against them. Drawing mainly on situations where relationships are tense and strained, though, he writes with great attention to the authenticity of his characters. While asking his society to re-examine its whole attitude towards matters relating to the family institution, such as love, marriage, and the upbringing of children. He does not fail to recognize the importance of having strong family ties as a form of protection for the individual, and as a safeguard against decadence and disintegration in society.



## Chapter Twelve

### THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN

In his pursuit of championing the underdog and helping those who need help, the Libyan short story writer could not have found a more noble cause than that of the oppressed woman. Writers competed in their efforts to tackle this issue when this form of literature, (i.e. the short story), first began. Despite the advances made by the women's movement in the course of the last three decades, this theme is still the most popular and dominant. This subject gives the writer something to which the writer can relate his own crisis in a society that savagely and inhumanly discriminates between men and women.

<sup>c</sup>Abd al-Qādir Abū Harrūs was one of the first Libyan writers to tackle this problem. In "Nufūs Hā'ira", (Restless Souls), his only collection of short stories, he dedicates some of the stories to the defence of the rights of women to lead the normal life deserved by any human being, and not to be imprisoned inside the cages of their houses as if they were inferior creatures. The strongest argument is conveyed through "Najlā' al-Hā'ira fī Dimashq"<sup>1</sup> (The Perplexed Najlā' of Damascus). It tells how on a visit to Syria the writer met a girl who was the daughter of a Libyan

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1. <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Qādir Abū Harrūs, "Najlā' al-Hā'ira fī Dimashq", Nufūs Hā'ira, (Tripoli 1957), p.27.

family resident in Damascus since the war. Having had the good fortune to be brought up outside Libya, Najlā' had led a full and active life. Had she stayed in Libya she would have been a mere creature imprisoned between four walls, denied the sight of the sun and compelled to walk in the streets with her face covered. When he told her of the condition of women in Libya, she expressed horror and anger in highly emotional language. She reflects on the shame of a country as noble as Libya, famous for its struggle, which, nevertheless, imprisoned its women who were, after all, entrusted with the bringing up of the new generations. How was it that they were kept like slave girls, denied their freedom and their dignity: "Is it not a shame and a disgrace?..... Is it not a crime committed against the Arab Nation?"<sup>1</sup>

After appealing to their sense of pride and their national feeling the writer chooses to give his readers a practical example of the harm inflicted upon women by treating them in this old and out of date fashion.

"Zilāl 'alā Wajh Malāk"<sup>2</sup> (Shadows on an Angel's Face) tells the sad story of two sisters, Najwā and Zuhra, two tormented souls. The elder sister Najwā is now considered mad, and people come up to her family saying: "Your honour is in jeopardy, the pride of the family is at stake"<sup>3</sup> as long as the girl was not committed to a mental hospital.

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1. Ibid., p.37.

2. Abū Harrūs, "Zilāl 'alā Wajh Malāk", Nufūs Hā'ira, p.61.

3. Ibid., p.6.



Najwā hears all this and is not angry at it. In fact she realizes that what she is doing is quite out of the ordinary. She is tired of the way of life she is expected to lead: "I am a mad woman forced to live with sane people"<sup>1</sup> and simply cannot understand why they have to deny her every basic human right. She begins to think aloud, questioning her life, her sister agrees with her:

"Is it not her right to be like the rest of God's creatures; is it not her right to have feelings, and to breathe the air that God creates for every being? She is a free person, she is a human being like the rest of the human race."<sup>2</sup>

After the opening sentences the writer shows us how Najwā came to have such dangerous ideas. We see her sister, Zuhra, persuading her to leave her books and come to the window to have a look at life outside their walls. The sight of Italian women<sup>3</sup> walking in the streets evokes a train of thought in her mind:

"Have you ever thought about these foreign women, how they walk freely in the streets, full of life and energy and elegance, while your mother withers away, dragging herself in pain? She only suffers because she is leading such an empty life. She is always treated as a despised servant, her only role being to receive orders and to obey them..... while women of other nationalities have their dignity preserved. They have their rights guaranteed..... and that is why they are walking in the streets full of life as free people do."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.62.

2. Ibid., p.66.

3. After the Second World War a large Italian community stayed on in Tripoli, and was not evacuated until 7th October, 1970.

4. Ibid., p.70.

The language in these early stories is always direct, ideas are stated in straightforward style and the point is made simply and clearly. The sister is thrilled with dreams of being free:

"I really want to be free, Najwā, I want to hold the hand of the man I love, and walk into the streets with my head in the sky, in defiance of all the eyes that are wide-open trying to swallow me. I want to feel really beautiful, attractive, and to have men desire me."<sup>1</sup>

The writer then goes into great detail to explain how both sisters become the victims of their rebellious spirit. At this point he apparently begins to betray the cause of women's liberation rather than to help it. Thus he begins to contradict what he has been preaching, thinking he will make more of an impact by exaggerating the sisters' misfortunes, but by doing this, he makes it appear as if the two sisters deserve this punishment. He makes them both fall in love with the same person whom they have seen through the window. He comes for the younger sister, while the other sister thinks that he has come for her, so that it is a shock when she learns the truth. From then on she refuses anyone who wants to marry her, thus denying her younger sister the chance to be married. The family abides by the laws of its society and therefore will not marry off the younger daughter until the older has gone first. Thus Najwā is destroying her own life and that of her sister.

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1. Ibid., p.71.



There is a darker fate awaiting Fātima in a story by Khalīfa al-Tikbālī. The story, called "Kalām al-Nās"<sup>1</sup> (Talk of the People), tells of how cruel people can be when they are blindfolded by peculiar ideas about the way women should behave. Fātima is a cheerful, playful girl, full of life, who is not averse to an occasional glance from behind the door at the young man standing in the street who is hoping to see her face. People start talking about her. Her father loves his daughter and knows she is a very well behaved girl, but the talk of the people becomes louder and louder. They do not just whisper, some of them come up to him and ask him to do something about his wounded dignity. The impact on him is so strong that he suppresses his conviction of the innocence of his girl, and without looking for evidence he goes out to buy a dagger with which to kill her. When he declares his intention, everyone at the shop from which he bought the dagger applauds the idea. As he is coming to kill Fātima, her mother stands in the way begging him to have mercy on her. Blinded by his anger and outrage and shame, he kills his wife and his daughter.

Here again the writer goes out of his way to exaggerate the case by resorting to melodramatic situations, to make us see how far people can go when obsessed by these cruel attitudes towards women. In the opinion of the writer society as a whole is the murderer of Fātima and her mother who are symbols of all women in a society that denies

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1. Khalīfa al-Tikbālī, "Kalām al-Nās", al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila, (Libya 1976), p.163.



them every right and suppresses any potential they may have towards leading a normal, happy life.

A girl sometimes looks upon marriage as a release from the oppression inflicted on her by her family, and she is relieved that she is going to be married even if she does not know the man to whose house she is to be taken. Such is the case of the heroine of a story by another writer of the same generation as Abū Harrūs. This story is by <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī and is entitled "Qarār al-Hufra"<sup>1</sup> (The Bottom of the Pit). When a young woman is denied the right to go out of the house, and is always beaten up, spat upon, and treated harshly in her father's house, she naturally looks upon the man who will come to marry her as her rescuer. But she finds out after the marriage that she has only exchanged one bad fate for another, when the same treatment continues:

"Now she has just realized the true nature of her predicament.

Once upon a time she thought she might escape the fate of being inside a dark pit when she was living in the house of her father, but alas, here she is again right at the bottom of another pit."<sup>2</sup>

There is a moment in the life of every girl living in this society when her existence is completely altered. This happens when she reaches a certain year in her teens, when an order comes that she

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1. <sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, "Qarār al-Hufra", Sittūn Qissa Qasīra,

(Libya 1975), p.209. This story was originally published in 1963.

2. Ibid., p.215.

must now stay at home. She is no more considered as a young girl who can go out with no veils and play in the streets. She is now a woman.

Abruptly her whole world changes. The playgrounds, the children of the neighbourhood, the streets, everything that she knows as a child is taken away from her at a stroke. She has now to accommodate herself to a different situation, and to start her new life in the confines of the house.

In "al-Bint Kaburat"<sup>1</sup> (The Girl has Grown Up), <sup>C</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī tries to capture the mood of a little girl faced with this moment and her inner conflict between a natural impulse to resist the sudden restriction on her freedom, and the traditional belief approved by society that she should accept her fate like every other woman in her situation. Is there a solution to her ordeal? The writer in this story could only offer his sympathy.

The fear with which a father views his daughter's fifteenth or sixteenth birthday is described vividly in a story called 'Maḥattat al-Utubīs'<sup>2</sup> (The Bus-Stop) by <sup>C</sup>Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣratī. As his daughter has become grown up the Hājj gives up every other thing and dedicates all his time and energy to watching over her so that she cannot be a source of shame to him. He inspects every move she

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1. <sup>C</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, "al-Bint Kaburat", Sittūn Qissa Qasīra, p.192.

2. <sup>C</sup>Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣratī, "Maḥattat al-Utubīs", Hafna min Ramād, (Beirut 1964), p.71.



makes, and searches her schoolbooks to see what she is reading.

Then comes the day when he issues his final order that the girl is not allowed to go to school anymore: "six years are enough".<sup>1</sup>

The Hājj is now a happy man. With his daughter locked behind the door he does not have to worry any more. But the problem starts when one day he finds a sign for a bus-stop planted directly in front of his house. In the past he had never allowed any youngster to hang around near the house, but now the bus-stop provides an excuse for any intruder at all to come and stand there presenting a serious threat to his honour. In a humorous style the writer describes how the Hājj goes about his campaign against the bus-stop which will expose his daughter to the danger of coming in contact with boys using the bus-stop as an excuse.

But Yūsuf al-Quwayrī, in a story published in 1959, called "al-Bint"<sup>2</sup> (The Girl), does not concern himself with the father of the family. He tries effectively to describe the feelings and the emotions of the girl herself. The story describes the feelings of a girl in her efforts to cope with a call coming from within her to unveil her face while walking along one of the busy streets in the centre of the city. What will happen if she just goes with her face uncovered? The question fills her mind with excitement. She can see no apparent logical reason for women to cover their faces, but she

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1. Ibid., p.72. The sentence is a reference to the primary school years.

2. Yūsuf al-Qawayrī, "al-Bint", Fī al-Adab wa-al-Hayāt, (Tripoli 1973), p.111.



remembers the voice of her father in his moments of rage and anger, she remembers also her mother, her memory is full of reproachful voices, the Imam in the mosque, the crowds praying there, and the children of the neighbourhood talking about the wayward ungodly woman. But the call of life invites her to join in, the noise of the roaring traffic around her, the glittering lights of the streets, the colourful mixture of people of different ages and nationalities. The reproachful voices gradually start to die down. Her hands holding the cover over her face are loosening their grip, and slowly the veil slips away and the lights of the street illuminate her face. She has defied the social rules and traditions, yet a feeling of happiness overwhelms her heart.

In "Sālīma"<sup>1</sup> by Bashīr al-Hāshimī, the setting is the old quarter of the city where a house is usually occupied by more than one family. When poverty and social oppression towards women are combined, there is only one thing a young woman like Sālīma can do with her ambitions and aspirations and that is to retreat into the land of day-dreams. Preparations for her brother's wedding are in progress, and her dreams are sparked off by a passing remark of one of the women present at that moment. The woman hopes that they will soon start preparing for Sālīma's wedding too. The remark starts a train of thought in the mind of the young woman. She remembers how she has now become

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1. Bashīr al-Hāshimī, "Sālīma", 3 Majmū'āt Qisāsiyya, (Tripoli n.d. 1980?), p.47.

house-bound after her brother tore up her school books and prevented her from going out of the house or continuing her education. He also commanded her to wear the farrāshiyya, the Libyan mantle which serves as a woman's veil. Now she can only look forward to the day of her marriage to rescue her from her existing predicament. As she wishes for that day a smile crosses her face while she is lying in bed for a moment. She is not now aware of all the noises that echo around the rooms of the house. She can only hear one voice, that of the man of her dreams calling upon her, "Sālima, Sālima". The voice is coming nearer and nearer and a big smile lights up her face.

But the fate that awaits these dreams is better described in a story called "Rihlat al-Ahlām"<sup>1</sup> (The Dream Journey) written by Muḥammad al-Shuwayhidī, the story is again about how society kills the legitimate dreams of a young woman who wants to marry the man she loves.

She awakes one morning feeling very happy, for this is the day she has always yearned for. Today Sa<sup>c</sup>īd will send a delegation from his family to meet her father and ask for her hand. Today she and Sa<sup>c</sup>īd will become officially engaged. She knows that her family agrees to him and it is only a formality but it is also an occasion to rejoice and feel happy.

"The days of the wedding will not be just three short days, the nights will not be just three nights. All our life will be a wedding party that will never end."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Muḥammad al-Shuwayhidī, "Rihlat al-Ahlām", Ahzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid (Benghazi 1973), p.13.

2. Ibid., p.14.



That is what they used to tell each other in their smuggled letters. But there is a real shock awaiting these dreams and expectations when the two families disagree over a trivial detail concerning the dowry. They mercilessly call off the whole affair, regardless of the emotions and feelings of the two persons involved. By this sort of behaviour has been created a system by which a family can easily victimize its own son, and another family its own daughter, shattering their dreams for very trivial reasons. The story states clearly that these reasons cannot justify the cruelty that is committed against the younger members of our society. It is meant to be an outcry in the face of these blind traditions.

Although the writer of this story comes from the eastern part of the country we can detect no difference in the basic problem he tackles from those that his colleagues in the western part write about. This is especially clear when the story deals with the plight of women; society in both parts of the country remains faithful to the old traditions and attitudes. In his story "Ahzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid"<sup>1</sup> (The Sorrows of One Day), al-Shuwayhidī tells of a day in the life of a girl twenty-one years of age, and the cruel treatment she receives from the moment she gets up in the early morning until she goes to bed at night. It is considered part of her training for married life to prepare the food, do the washing-up, clean the house and put up with all the complaints and grumblings about whatever she does from every member

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1. Al-Shawayhidī, "Ahzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid", Ahzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid, p.33.



of the family. Remarks come flying into her face from every direction:

"I don't know when you are going to learn. You are the cause of my grief and illness, you don't care about anything, you are the worst of them all, what a wretched husband destiny will take you to, what a disaster you are to me!"<sup>1</sup>

Her mother goes on reproaching her:

"Spinster, you are a spinster. Nobody wants you, you will spend your days in the captivity of those walls which radiate misery."<sup>2</sup>

In the afternoon her father gives money to her brother to go and see a film, but she has to stay home because she is a woman. "She wished that she was a boy, so that she could enjoy all these privileges."<sup>3</sup>

As she is left alone in the house, she grabs the chance to cast a little glance at the world outside the house by looking through the window. As she looks, she saw a young man standing across the street. But before she has had a chance to see what he looks like her elder brother comes in. He is furious to see her standing near the window. And he immediately starts beating her.

"You are killing me with shame, but before I die I will finish you off. How am I going to face the people in our street? How will they look upon me when your disgraceful behaviour follows me wherever I go?"<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.37.

2. Ibid., p.37.

3. Ibid., p.38.

4. Ibid., p.40.

He continues beating her until she faints. The author makes the family's reaction to what has happened more cruel than the act itself; the comment of the father goes like this:

"Having daughters is a tragedy that falls on men. If she was a boy nothing of the sort would have happened. I wish he'd killed her and rid us of her burden, for soon people's tongues will start to wag about our scandal."<sup>1</sup>

This is only one day in the life of an average Libyan girl. In this case the writer chose a very extreme example in order to highlight the cruelty and the ill treatment women receive in such societies. In "Mas<sup>C</sup>ūd Yu<sup>C</sup>ākis Mas<sup>C</sup>ūda"<sup>2</sup> by the same author we see a reference made to the ancient savage custom practised by Arabs in the age of ignorance before the emergence of Islam, when they used to bury their daughters alive. The writer brings this up in order to draw a comparison between the two cruel societies, as well as to call the attention of his readers to the fact that these practices, which are sometimes committed in the name of religion, have in fact nothing to do with Islam which was a revolution against these pagan practices. In this story we meet a father similar to the father in the previous story, who thinks that girls are seeds planted by Satan. He thinks that the ancient Arabs were right to bury their daughters alive because they can only bring shame, and he thinks of his daughter Mas<sup>C</sup>ūda as a curse that has fallen upon him.

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1. Ibid., p.43.

2. Al-Sh<sup>U</sup>wayhidī, "Mas<sup>C</sup>ūd Yu<sup>C</sup>ākis Mas<sup>C</sup>ūda", Ahzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid, p.71.

To give us a balanced picture of what is happening in society, and to give the forces of change their due, the same author writes another story. Here we see the brother as an enlightened young man, representing this new force in society, and defending his sister's right to continue her education. The author gives us an insight into the struggle that takes place within the family. The father in "Mamnū<sup>c</sup> al-Khurūj"<sup>1</sup> (Going Out is Forbidden) had decided that his daughter has arrived at the age where she should stay at home.

"A girl's place is inside the house. It is enough for her to have learnt some verses of the Quran and the basic principles of Islam. She should now stay at home and wait for her man of destiny and meanwhile give her mother a helping hand."<sup>2</sup>

The girl in the story remains passive to what is going on, but her brother stands up for her cause and explains to the father how things have changed.

"I do not agree with you father. Everything has changed. Every girl now goes to school, so why should we deprive Sālīma of it? She is my sister and I know that she will live up to what is expected of her."<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the day the brother wins the argument, and the girl is able to continue her studies, although her movement is restricted to the school. The story ends on a hopeful note when Sālīma on her way to the school meets Mahmūd with whom she starts exchanging love

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1. Al-Shuwayhidī, "Mamnū<sup>c</sup> al-Khurūj", Aḥzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid, p.77.

2. Ibid., p.81.

3. Ibid., p.81.



letters. And that is how Sālīma escapes the fate of the principal character in another story entitled "I<sup>c</sup>tirāfāt Jarī'a"<sup>1</sup> (Daring Confessions). The character in this story is denied the chance to continue her studies. She tries in every way she can, but her family sticks to its decision that she should stay at home. They think that if she goes to highschool and mixes with men she might lose her chastity and honour. In defiance of her family and as an expression of anger and frustration she sets herself on a suicidal course and decides to lose her virginity to prove to her family that honour is irrelevant to whether a girl goes to school or stays at home. She gives herself to the first man that passes in front of her door as her reply to the arrogance and narrow-mindedness of her family, knowing all the while that she is destroying herself at the same time.

This story was written in the mid-Sixties, and it indicates some sense of protest and rebellion on the part of women against the treatment they receive under the oppressive rules of a traditional and ultra-conservative society.

The writers' treatment is less dramatic with regard to women as they advance in age and we see how their treatment in early life has affected them in later years. Rules and conditions will have become for them a way of life. Human beings can adapt themselves to

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1. Al-Shuwayhidī, "I<sup>c</sup>tirāfāt Jarī'a", Ahzān al-Yawm al-Wāhid, p.109.

harsh realities and confinement to the house where a woman has had to spend a life-time can still have its moments of joy. Nevertheless, there are times when the bitterness lingers on. That is how <sup>C</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, in his short story "Qit<sup>C</sup>a min al-Khubz"<sup>1</sup> (A Slice of Bread) describes a woman trapped in a marriage that was imposed on her. She keeps reminding her husband of it saying, "you have bought me",<sup>2</sup> referring to the way that marriage is arranged, so that a man with more money is favoured by the family and accepted as the future husband of their daughter. Her husband looks down on her life before she came to live with him:

" - What did your life look like before me?

- Nothing.

- I made you. I made myself.

- Yourself?

- Yes.

- That is the only thing you ever loved.

- True. Myself. What was your life before me? If it wasn't for me you'd have been waiting for a loaf of bread baked by your mother. But now look around you."<sup>3</sup>

Referring of course to the luxurious setting. But her answer is brief and sharp. It comes in one word, revealing her deep-rooted disappointment and bitterness: "ruins".

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1. Al-Quwayrī, "Qit<sup>C</sup>a min Khubz", Sittūn Qissa Qasīra, p.224.

2. Ibid., p.232.

3. Ibid., p.232.

" 'Ruins.'

'Shut up!'

'I see nothing but ruins.'

'You are very ungrateful.'"<sup>1</sup>

He finally says: "You hate me!" To which she replies: "You started to hate me first."<sup>2</sup>

That is the opinion of the writer on how a marriage built on those wrong and unjust rules can only lead to ruins, and can offer nothing to the woman in later years but bitterness and frustration.

"Maryam"<sup>3</sup> by Bashīr al-Hāshimī tells of how Maryam, a fat, lazy, negligent absent-minded woman who often stares at nothing and laughs for no reason, was once upon a time the prettiest most beautiful and joyful girl in the neighbourhood. Once full of life and energy, it is strange how after a few years of married life she has turned to the opposite of what she was. The impact must have been immeasurable. The story is told through the eyes of one of the family's boys who knew Maryam when she was a few years younger and witnessed the big change that came over her. He instinctively realizes why that has happened.

"She joined the very long queue of women whose life is spent between the walls of the house, preparing the meals, washing the clothes, and lying in bed."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.233.

2. Ibid., p.233.

3. Al-Hāshimī, "Maryam", 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qaṣaṣiyya, p.251.

4. Ibid., p.255.



As he compares the two conflicting images of Maryam in his mind, the little girl with rosy cheeks, bouncing and whispering funny words in the ears of other girls, and the fat sluggish and dull woman she has become he can only ask angrily, "What's happened to Maryam?"<sup>1</sup> The story ends on this general note:

"And a strange, wide smile covers her face. A smile that doesn't remind you of laughter but of depression and crying, the crying for our little desires that were thrown against a hollow stone, full of echoes, called life."<sup>2</sup>

But the scene is changing. The working woman is soon to appear as a major character in Libyan short stories. The female teacher, and female nurse were the first jobs women ventured to take. Teaching has always been an acceptable profession as long as the woman remains within the walls of the girls' school and goes to her job in veiled clothes. Nursing was a more daring job in the early days, because it involved mixing with men inside the hospital. An early story, "Hikāya Qadīma"<sup>3</sup> (An Old Tale) by Yūsuf al-Sharīf written in the early Sixties tells of how people on the fringe of the city refuse to accept any change. Their fury and anger is aroused when one of the local girls starts to work as a nurse, but instead of leaving her job as a result of their anger, she just leaves the street to go and live in another quarter of the city where her job is tolerated. Now

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1. Ibid., p.256.

2. Ibid., p.256.

3. Yūsuf al-Sharīf, "Hikāya Qadīma", al-Jidār, (Tripoli 1966), p.45.

they are faced with a new situation when from nowhere a family appears, and resides in the street, a family that does not abide by their rules. The twenty year old daughter of the family does not wear the traditional clothes, she walks in the area without a veil, wearing her elegant western type of dress and her black long hair is in plaits, and crossing the street in defiance of their fury, hostility and taboos. The elderly people of the area start campaigning against this because it presents a real threat to all the values they have cherished and guarded all their lives. When they have failed to convince the father to lock up his daughter they start asking them to leave the area. In order to expose the hypocrisy of these old traditions, the writer makes the leading campaigner Ḥājj <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Salām fall in love with the girl, thus making himself an object of ridicule and jokes. So he takes his belongings and leaves the area. The writer here is heralding the triumph of the new against the old, and the inevitable defeat of those who are not open to change and progress.

With later works that were written in the late Sixties and early Seventies, the treatment is different, and the dynamic society reveals itself through the new voices of Libyan literature. The professional woman has now become an integral part of society, and writers like Khalīfa Ḥusayn Mustafā, and Ibrāhīm al-~~K~~ūnī are representatives of a new generation of writers who started to tackle social issues with more sophistication and finesse, ~~helped~~ by the impact made by the 1969 revolution which has changed the old structure of authority and



introduced new radical measures in the social economic, and political structure of the country. Among these are measures to encourage women to play an active role in society and allow them to have equal opportunities in work and political representation.

The conflict between the old society and the newly emerging one is more explicit within the minds and hearts of educated women. In "Sūr min Waraq"<sup>1</sup> (The Paper Fence), we meet a lady who tells, with a bitterness that sometimes becomes cynicism, her own story as a professional woman:

"My life could have followed the usual pattern until it met its tragic end, as the case can be with every other girl in our veiled city. They either die or get married. What is the difference? I myself see both ends as two faces of one mirror covered with dust. I can see in it my happy death, and I can see also myself being taken to that damp prison cell to live there forever. In fact I don't loathe the prison as much as I loathe the prison guard. I was never able to imagine what he could look like. At the end my ambition was to have the chance to choose my guard."<sup>2</sup>

That is how an educated woman views marriage and how she refers to her future husband. A woman like her deserves whatever treatment she gets in the eyes of her society:

"Am I not just a girl. A girl, who since the day she was born, carries her shame beneath her skirt, a girl who comes where nobody wants her or needs her, for everyone in the family is expecting a boy."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Khalīfa Ḥusayn Muṣṭafā, "Sūr min Waraq", Tawqī'āt 'alā al-Lahm (Tripoli 1975), p.21.

2. Ibid., p.23.

3. Ibid., p.23.



But the course of her life changes when her father falls ill and she has to work to support her family. The new life is a very big challenge and she takes up the challenge. It is like walking along a slippery snowy path, hoping that "the snow will soon melt".<sup>1</sup> She has to prove to everybody in her community who may view her new life with suspicion and fear, that a woman can go to work, and can still maintain her honour and dignity and command the respect of others. When the same contractor who offers her the job wants to take advantage of the situation and comes asking to marry her, she finds herself brave enough to refuse him, and to resist the pressure of her family. Another man appears on the scene whom she accepts, but her ill father thinks he is not suitable for her, and as a girl who respects her father she abides by his decision. She wants to marry somebody she likes but not against the will of her family. It is a sacrifice, but her life does not end there, and she goes as usual to work, "climbing the rays of the morning sun every day",<sup>2</sup> and never loses her dignified bearing.

The "paper fence" the writer is referring to in the title is that fence which stands between women and work. The woman in the story is an example of every woman who should be able to lead an honourable and respectable life while working side by side with men.

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1. Ibid., p.27.

2. Ibid., p.32.

Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī in his story "Hiya wa-al-Kilāb"<sup>1</sup> (She and the Dogs) chooses a moment in the life of his heroine when he can expose her to those evils that are latent in her city. Laylā is not aware of them because they can only be provoked by the darkness of night. The lady in the story is an active member in the women's liberation movement inside the country, and a lecturer on the subject of equality between men and women. Once she has to stay out late, and as night falls she walks towards the bus-stop to take the bus home, and that is when she experiences her first encounter with the stray dogs of night as the story calls them. As she waits for the bus she has to put up with obscene remarks flying in her face, and with cars racing past her with drivers blinking their lights for her and braking, stinging her with glances. A man near her tries with infuriating persistence to persuade her to go with him. The bus does not come so she decides to walk. In the middle of the road she finds out that she is being followed by a group of youngsters.

"They bolted towards her like some legendary animal who had gone hungry for a million years and was now stalking a prey who had suddenly fallen down from the sky. They surged forward, coming nearer and nearer and she set off running."<sup>2</sup>

She runs till she finds herself in a perfumery shop. The man in the shop in which she takes refuge seems to be a religious God-fearing

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1. Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī, "Hiya wa-al-Kilāb", al-Salāt Khārij Nitāq al-Awqāt al-Khāmsa, (Tripoli 1974), p.5.

2. Ibid., pp.8-9.



man with prayer beads in his hands. As she is gasping for breath he brings her a glass of water and expresses his happiness to be able to offer any help. Her faith in human nature is restored by meeting this remarkable man. After a long conversation about how dangerous it is for a woman to walk alone in the streets at night, the man asks her to spend the night in his company. She had noticed the way he looked at her body and felt scared and disgusted at the same time. She insists that he call the police to take her home, and he is disappointed; "the bird that fell from the sky was just about to fly from the cage".<sup>1</sup> He agrees to call the police, but the policeman who comes makes no effort to hide his desire for her. She is frightened to accompany him because he might try to rape her. She requests a taxi, and as she jumps into it she remembers the sort of conversation she used to have with her husband:

"After spending two months honeymoon in Paris, Ahmad said to her in a gently mocking tone:

'How long are you going to continue challenging traditional customs by chasing after the latest fashions, and mixing with men, staying out late with your girl friends as European women do?'

'What is the difference between the European women and me? At least intellectually speaking, if we have both read Kafka, Neruda, Nietzsche, Hemingway, and Sartre? I am a serious woman, even if I like fashion and soirees, and you know that.'

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1. Ibid., p.12.



'I didn't intend to demean your behaviour or your earnestness, but the societies differ. That is where the tragedy lies, that our society is not like European societies.'"<sup>1</sup>

Only a week before a colleague of hers told her that he was not:

"content with the liberation of women if it is not radical, for liberation in a backward society like ours is only a false liberation, one which is not genuine. Your problem is that you're stubborn. They will make you pay the price for that."<sup>2</sup>

Instead of taking her to her house, the taxi driver takes her in another direction where it will be possible for him to rape her and no one will be able to hear her screams. She grabs his neck, and in the confusion of the moment she throws herself out of the car and runs back home.

The writer does not make her lose the battle against "the dogs" and become a victim of a sexual attack. She has escaped this fate, but she has not escaped the emotional and mental consequences, and the far reaching psychological impact of this journey.

Laylā in this story represents the liberal, intellectual, broad-minded outlook of a woman who has the advantage of having a tolerant husband who, in turn, represents the new and modern thinking. But deep-rooted beliefs cannot easily be swept aside. Even if the old order has got to go the injuries and distortions left in people's minds cannot easily be cured and so Laylā has to pay the price for being the vanguard of a new era.

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1. Ibid., p.14.

2. Ibid., p.14.

## CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this thesis we noted that the social conditions pertaining to Libya were conducive to the emergence of the short story as the dominant literary form, and in the body of the text we discussed the main exponents of the Libyan short story, their major works, preoccupations and common cultural heritage. It is perhaps appropriate, by way of conclusion, to remind ourselves of those features which characterise the Libyan short story.

We have seen in Chapter One how the Libyan people had undergone a common cultural and historical experience and how they had emerged from the period of colonialism as a unified society with little cultural, economic, or social diversity, but, as a result of the isolation imposed by Italian rule, almost thirty years behind their Arab neighbours in terms of cultural activity.

Having defined what is meant by a short story in Chapter Two, we have traced, in Chapter Three, the Libyan short story from its first tentative beginnings to its emergence in the mid-Thirties as a distinctive literary form. In these stories of the Thirties a sense of betrayal and total submission to fate and destiny was expressed, reflecting the prevailing mood in the country after the popular resistance was subdued and colonial rule was firmly established.

In the second part of the thesis we have attempted to make an objective critical analysis of the works of some of the most prominent



Libyan short story writers during the last three decades classifying them according to their dominant approaches which were, for the purposes of this study, categorised as the emotional, the tell-a-tale, the realistic and the analytical.

The emotional approach, the first to be adopted by the Libyan writers during the first years of Independence, is characterised by a concern for suppressed love, in which was expressed a sense of anguish and sorrow, usually in a personal and subjective style resorting to a world of dreams and escapism, echoing the influence of Egyptian and Lebanese romantic writers.

The tell-a-tale approach was adopted by writers who, with differing degrees of success, attempted to discover in the heritage of Libyan folklore and popular Arabic Literature a format for the short story. This format was to be distinguished from the artistic short story, which they considered the product of an alien culture. These writers in most of their stories depicted a world permeated with fantasy and superstition.

The realistic approach was a major development in the Libyan short story, employed by writers committed to the national cause of their country, who attempted through realism to project a truthful picture of the harsh conditions under which the working man lived. They were mostly influenced by Arab socialist writers.

The analytical approach was a radical departure from the old themes and situations, by which more developed techniques were to be used. The proponents of this approach transformed the events in the story

from the outside world to the inner world of the character, focusing mainly on the conflict between the individual and his environment. While the realistic approach came about as a reaction to the over-use of escapism in the works of emotional writers, the analytical approach was, in turn, a reaction to extensive external description of the realistic stories which had neglected the inner world of the character.

In each of these four approaches we can observe a particularly Libyan character which is the most evident in the powerful sense of protest that pervades most short stories. The intensity with which this sense of protest is expressed can be found in all the four approaches, giving the Libyan short story an identity of its own.

We can also identify another characteristic feature of the Libyan short story in the study of the themes in the third part of the thesis. The stamp of the Libyan story is its preoccupation with social issues that arise in a traditional society with a basic bedouin structure where the rights of the individual are sometimes sacrificed in order to maintain social cohesion and to preserve social traditions. This creates a conflict between self and society, between the individual and his community. This conflict was further intensified by the discovery of oil which very rapidly transformed the material environment, but was unable to create a change in attitudes appropriate to those dramatic developments. Here the short story serves to document this crisis by recording the many individual instances of anger and frustration.



The Libyan writer protests against the many negative aspects of the changes he sees happening, but at the same time he is capable of protesting against the society that refuses to change. This apparent contradiction is better understood within the historical context of Libyan society. Italian colonialism represented a period of national suffering and humiliation, fuelled by a sense of betrayal and impotency, and even after independence there was no sense of liberation. The discovery of oil improved the standard of living of the people, but was to embitter the writer as he saw the wealth accumulated in the hands of foreigners and an extremely small clique of entrepreneurs. It is not to be wondered then, that after so many years of repression, the Libyan writer should emerge articulating this suppressed sense of indignation that his countrymen had been forced to swallow for countless years.

The Libyan short story writer feels that it is his duty to express the frustration of the common people and to document their stoic endurance and their tremendous capacity for suffering.

Thus we have identified the main elements of the Libyan short story, a preoccupation with social issues and a powerful sense of protest. By dwelling on the social issues the writer uses the short story as an instrument by which he may create a better society, a society in which the rights of the individual are safeguarded. By protesting, the writer is expressing, in his own way, the spirit of his land, which has finally, after years of silence, found its voice.



## APPENDIX

BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES OF THE PRINCIPAL<sup>AL</sup> AUTHORS  
CITED IN PARTS TWO AND THREE

### Abū Harrūs

<sup>c</sup>Abd al-Qādir Abū Harrūs. Born in Tripoli, 1930. Graduated in the late Forties from Teachers' College and after working for a few years as a primary school teacher he joined the Tripoli Broadcasting House and became a broadcaster and literary editor. In 1960 he was appointed editor of al-Rā'id newspaper, and later he became its owner. Since then he has abandoned writing stories. Nufūs Hā'ira is his only book of short stories, which was published in 1957. He also wrote a few other stories under the penname "Al-Ānisa Samīra"; they were relayed over the radio but not published in book form.

### Abū Shuwaysha

Ridwān Abū Shuwaysha. Essayist and journalist, born in al-<sup>c</sup>Asīziyya near Tripoli in 1945. He started contributing articles to various local newspapers in the late Sixties and in 1972 he joined the cultural weekly al-Usbū<sup>c</sup> al-Thaqāfī, where he published most of his articles and tales. In the mid-Seventies he joined the Libyan newsagency, and was sent to Ireland as a correspondent. He is married to Orla Woods, who has helped him to translate his stories into English.

### al-Barūnī

Za<sup>c</sup>īma Sulaymān al-Barūnī (1910-1976). The daughter of the Libyan resistance leader al-Barūnī, she was born in Jādū in Jabal Nafūsa. She migrated with her family to Syria where she attended Arabic schools. After the country gained its independence in 1951 she returned to Libya and joined the Ministry of Education where she played a major role in promoting women's education and adult education. She published many articles on the well-being of the community under her favourite penname "Bint al-Waṭan" (The Daughter of the Homeland). She has also written the biography of her father.

### al-Dilansī

Yūsuf al-Dilansī. Born in Benghazi in 1929. In 1948 he began his working life as a teacher which he left for an administrative job in the Government (first in the Upper House of Representatives, "Majlis al-Shuyūkh", and then in the Ministry of Justice). From the early Fifties and until his death in 1968 al-Dilansī continued writing stories for different Libyan journals, amongst them Hunā Tarābulus al-Gharb, al-Ṭamān and Fazzān. His stories are not available in book form.



### al-Fākhiri

Khalīfa al-Fākhiri. Born in Benghazi in 1937, contributed regularly to the daily al-Haqīqa during the late Sixties and early Seventies. In the mid-Seventies he joined the Libyan Foreign Office and was sent to Denmark where he worked for four years as the head of the Press Office. Mawsim al-Hikāyāt (1974) is the only book of short stories he has published.

### al-Hāshimī

Bashīr al-Hāshimī. Born in Miṣrāta in 1936. A self-taught writer who had no education beyond elementary level. Since 1957, when he published his first short story, al-Hāshimī has become a prominent member of the literary establishment, writing stories as well as literary studies. In the mid-Sixties he was appointed the managing editor of al-Ruwād magazine. He wrote three volumes of short stories: al-Nās wa-al-Dunyā, 1965, Ahzān<sup>c</sup> Ammī al-Dūkālī, 1967 and al-Asābi<sup>c</sup> al-Saghīra, 1972, which he later published in one volume entitled 3 Majmū<sup>c</sup>āt Qaṣaṣiyya.

### al-Hūnī

Muhammad Abū al-Qāsim al-Hūnī. Born in al-Marj near Benghazi in 1937. He left school at an early age, and while working as a clerk in Governmental offices he continued his studies until he became qualified in law. He is now working in the General Inspection Office. Among his works of short stories are Sharkh Fī al-Mir'āt (Tripoli 1978), al-Khatī'a (Benghazi 1968).

### al-Kūnī

Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī. Born in Ghadāmis in the southern part of Libya in 1948. He was offered a scholarship to study literature in the Gorki Institute in Moscow where he spent five years. He started publishing stories and articles in 1968 in the newspaper Fazzān which used to be published in Sabhā. He writes essays and literary studies, and he works now in the Libyan Bureau in Poland, where he edits a cultural/political magazine called al-Sadāqa. His only book of short stories is al-Salāt Khārij Nitāq al-Awqāt al-Khamsa and was published in 1974.

### al-Maqhūr

Kāmil Hasan al-Maqhūr. Born in Tripoli in 1935. One of the pioneers of the realistic short story in Libya. After graduating from Cairo University in the mid-Fifties and being qualified as a lawyer, he returned to Tripoli where he became involved in arranging cultural seminars and public debates on literary subjects. In 1972 he became the Libyan Envoy to the United Nations. He was recently given the post of Secretary of Petroleum. 14 Qissa min Madīnatī (1965) and al-Ams al-Mashnūq (1968) are the only books he has published.

### al-Misallātī

Muhammad al-Misallātī. Born in Benghazi in 1949. He began writing articles for the Benghazi newspapers al-Haqīqa and al-Raqīb in 1970. After finishing his secondary schooling he started working as an official in a public company where he still works. Since then he has published two books: al-Dajīj, 1977, and Khawātir li-al-Hubb, 1981.

### al-Misratī

<sup>c</sup>Alī Muṣṭafā al-Misratī. Born 1926 in Alexandria in Egypt, the country to which his family fled from the atrocities of the fascist rule in the mid-Twenties in Libya. Graduated from al-Azhar University



in 1948, and returned to Tripoli to join the battle for independence. He became one of the activists in the National Congress Party, addressing public rallies and writing for the journal of the party. In 1954 he became the editor of the literary magazine Hunā Tarābulus al-Gharb which was issued by the Broadcasting House. Since his return to his country he has <sup>occupied</sup> ~~engaged~~ himself in studies concerning different aspects of cultural life, producing a large number of books. He also owned a newspaper in the late Sixties and early Seventies called al-Sha<sup>c</sup>b, and a publishing house called Dār al-Misrātī. From 1960 to 1965 he was a member of the opposition parliamentary group. Part of his efforts were devoted to short story writing. Among his works of short stories, al-Shirā<sup>c</sup> al-Mumazzaq (Cairo 1963), Hafna min Ramād (Beirut 1964), al-Shams wa-al-Ghirbāl (Cairo 1977).

### Mustafā

Khalīfa Husayn Mustafā. Born in Tripoli in 1944. He worked as a teacher for a few years, and then in 1973 he joined the cultural weekly al-Usbū<sup>c</sup> al-Thaqāfī to become a full-time writer. He also lived in London for three years in the late Seventies, where he attended an English language course. His first book of short stories was published in 1975, entitled Sakhab al-Mawtā. He published two more volumes, as well as two short novels. Recently he started writing children's stories.

### al-Na<sup>CC</sup>ās

Mardiyya al Na<sup>CC</sup>ās. Born in Derna in 1949. From the late Sixties she started contributing to various journals in Tripoli and Benghazi. She dedicated part of her creative talent to writing novels about the place of women in society. Ghazāla (1976) is her only book of short stories.

### Nasr

Aḥmad Naṣr. Born in Miṣrāta in 1941, and graduated from Cairo University in 1967. He worked as a teacher in the Teachers' College of Miṣrāta. He also travelled to some African countries where he taught Arabic. He occasionally publishes his stories in journals and magazines. Among his books is Wa Tabā<sup>C</sup>tharat al-Nujūm (Alexandria 1970).

### al-Nayhūm

Ṣādiq al-Nayhūm. Born in Benghazi in 1937. After finishing his studies at the Libyan University in Benghazi he travelled to Finland, where he became a correspondent for the Libyan daily al-Haqīqa. Here he began publishing articles that gained him the admiration of the reading public for their irony and sense of humour. His only book of short stories is Min Qisas al-Atfāl (1972). He also wrote a novel entitled Min Makka ilā Hunā (Benghazi, 1970). He is now the head of a publishing company and resides in Geneva.

### al-Qabā'ilī

Lutfiyya al-Qabā'ilī. Born in Tripoli in 1945. She joined the Libyan women's magazine al-Mar'a in the mid-Sixties as one of its writers. A few years later she became the editor-in-chief of the magazine, which changed its name to al-Bayt. Amānī Mu<sup>c</sup>allaba is the only book she has published, containing stories and articles that were originally written for the magazine.

### al-Quwayrī

<sup>c</sup>Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī. Born 1930 in a village in Middle Egypt called Ṣamalūt. Graduated from Cairo University in 1955, and returned two years later to his native country, Libya, where he began taking an active part in literary life. Since then he has published six collections of short stories as well as other books of essays and plays. He has written for many journals and established a publishing house of his own. He was at odds with the royalist regime and left the country to live in Tunisia and France for three years. In 1973 he was appointed Minister of State for Information in the government of the Union of Arab Republics, members of the union being Libya, Egypt, Syria. Among his works of short stories, Sittūn Qissa Qasīra, (Libya 1975), al-Zayt wa-al-Tamr, 3rd edition, (Tripoli 1980).



### al-Quwayrī

Yūsuf al-Quwayrī. Born in Egypt in 1938, returned to his country of origin in 1957 and began working as a journalist and critic with various Libyan journals. He is an essayist of a high standard and occasionally he writes a short story: a few of them were included in his book Fī al-Adab wa-al-Hayāt, which was published in 1973.

### al-Sharīf

Yūsuf al-Sharīf. Born in Waddān in the south of the country in 1938. He worked as a teacher in a primary school for a few years, but he interrupted his career in teaching to continue his higher studies. He began publishing his stories in 1958 and since then he has produced two volumes of short stories: al-Jidār, 1966, and al-Aqdām al-<sup>c</sup>Āriya, 1975. His first book won him the third prize in a competition arranged by the Ministry of Culture and Information and in 1970 he was awarded the Certificate of Merit for his contribution to the short story field.

### al-Shuwayhidī

Muḥammad al-Shuwayhidī. Born in Benghazi in 1942. Started his career as a writer with al-Haqīqa newspaper, where he published his articles and stories during the Sixties. In 1972 he was appointed the editor of a daily journal in Tripoli, and became, for a brief period, the Secretary of Culture and Information. He now edits an Arabic weekly which comes out in Cyprus. His two books of short stories are Ahzān al-Yawmal-Wāhid, 1973, and Aqwāl Shāhid<sup>c</sup> Iyān, 1976.

### al-Tikbālī

Khalīfa al-Tikbālī, (1938-1966). Born in Tripoli and left school at an early age to work at different odd jobs, among them as a petrol station attendant. In 1959 he travelled to Germany looking for work, where he stayed for three years. On his return he joined the Military Academy, graduating as an officer in 1965. His first stories started appearing in local journals in 1958 and his first book of short stories, Tamarrud, was published in 1966, the year of his death, after he had been awarded the second prize for short story writing in a literary competition arranged by the Ministry of Culture and Information in Tripoli. Most of his short stories were collected and published in 1976 in one volume entitled al-A<sup>c</sup>māl al-Kāmila.

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